

**A LIBERAL THEOLOGY FOR LAY PEOPLE**

by

**David M. Held**

**A professional project  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to produce a theologically liberal summary of the Christian faith in nontechnical language for lay people. It has been prompted by the fact that there is so little printed material available to fulfill the need of questioning laity who earnestly are seeking some guidance in their quest for a theological position that is adequate for the needs of modern life and does not violate their intellectual integrity. In recent years there has been an aggressiveness on the part of the fundamentalists and theologically conservative "evangelicals" to provide readily available tracts and books to draw Christians to their point of view. This book is meant to provide the liberal alternative. The hope is that it will give encouragement to the people who are already members of main-stream churches and will help them clarify their faith. It is also addressed to those who are restless in their conservative theology and seek a more liberating understanding of the Gospel that fits with their knowledge in other fields.

The method used in this project is described in the appendix. Ten lay persons were chosen to evaluate the success of the project. At the very beginning they were invited to give their guidance in the selection of the subjects to be included in the book, and as the writing progressed, they evaluated the effectiveness of each chapter in communicating a liberal statement of the Christian faith. A tabulation of their

appraisals together with additional written comments and suggestions are included in the appendix.

The first eight chapters of the book are brief and forthright but attempt to address the central theological issues under each chapter heading, and the final short chapter seeks to sum up the significance of what has been said.

The chapter on the Bible acquaints the lay reader with the modern scholarly approach to Bible study and provides a point of view that should help lay people in their own scripture reading. The second chapter on the nature of God spells out some of the very important things that the Bible says about God and reflects "naturalism" and "process theology" in its theological exposition. Chapter 3 deals with the problem of human evil and makes clear our need to be saved from our alienation and brokenness. The discussion of Jesus as teacher and messiah in the fourth chapter narrates His life, summarizes His teachings, and affirms His messiahship. In the following chapter there is an explanation of the sense in which Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and the challenge we face to respond in faith and commitment for our own liberation and salvation. Chapter 6 is an in-depth study of the nature, the methods, and the fruits of prayer. In the seventh chapter the role of Christian world missions is discussed, affirming the validity of the world outreach of Christians and the uniqueness of the revelation in Jesus Christ. Chapter 8 gives a strong statement of the social responsibility of Christians indivi-

dually and corporately to implement their ethics and ideals in the public affairs of communities and nations, seeking a social as well as an individual realization of God's kingdom of righteousness. The concluding chapter is brief and yet brings to focus the central thrust of the book, the significance of this liberal theological orientation, and the challenge to all of us to pursue the life of faith.

The response to this project by the lay readers has been gratifying because they revealed that their reading of the text stimulated their own theological quest, helped them clarify their thoughts even when they did not fully agree with the ideas presented, and challenged their own spiritual growth. Therefore among this sampling of ten laity, at least, the goals of the project have been realized.

## INTRODUCTION

Long ago the Apostle Paul preached in the most cultured and sophisticated city of the ancient world, Athens. He stood on Mars Hill near the Acropolis and said to the throng of people gathered to hear him, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious."<sup>1</sup> What he meant was that there were various religions on all sides; everyone had some kind of religion. So it is today! There is a widespread renewed interest in religion. Some have turned to Eastern philosophies, others to new emerging cults led by colorful leaders, still others to faith healing and glossolalia, and some even to witchcraft, satanism, and other superstitions. There is a deep spiritual hunger that is leading people in many directions.

Our interest is in the Christian quest. We sincerely believe that the Good News of the Christian faith is not only true but best meets the spiritual needs of our time or any other time. God has revealed to some extent His purpose and truth to the people of many religious traditions, depending upon the openness and sincerity of their quest. His revelation in Jesus Christ, however, is unique in its fullness and glory. And so we say that Jesus Christ stands above all others as the One in whom we behold supremely the love and will of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Acts 17:22

But there are different approaches to the Christian faith. There are the Biblical literalists, often called "fundamentalists," who run into all kinds of problems by insisting that every verse of the Bible is to be understood as a statement of historical fact. Then there are the theologically-conservative so-called "evangelicals" who engage in careful Biblical studies but always draw the rigidly orthodox conclusions that sometimes conflict with the known facts in other fields. We respect the sincerity of our Christian colleagues who hold these positions, but they live in a different thought world.

The position taken in this book is rather that of the theological liberal, that is, the person who seeks to be completely open to all critical studies not only in the field of Biblical and theological research, but also in archeology, history, philosophy, the physical sciences, and every scholarly endeavor that sheds light on our quest for truth. Instead of drawing our doctrinal conclusions in advance, we must do our painstaking study first and be utterly fearless in our search for the facts. Religion must never be considered as a separate discipline, detached from other areas of learning. Rather theological truth is related to all other knowledge, and we must focus the data derived from other fields of study on our understanding of religion. Truth discovered in the other sciences can serve as a corrective to theology, the queen of the sciences. And vice versa, religious truth helps interpret



and give meaning to knowledge in other fields. Our deep concern is the fullest possible grasp of truth, for as Jesus said, "you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."<sup>1</sup>

Our purpose in this book, then, is to communicate the Christian faith as it is generally understood by those who take this theologically liberal stance--taking into consideration all religious studies as well as all other scholarly disciplines. Then we shall proclaim a faith that enables us to maintain our intellectual integrity. We need to love God with our minds as well as our hearts. Knowledge and faith must always be partners in the Christian life. An exclusive interest in either one to the exclusion of the other results in a distortion. If we simply intellectualize our religion, we may know a great deal about religion but have no religion. But, on the other hand, if we concern ourselves only with faith and commitment, we shall not be able to uproot errors in our religious thought and may even incorporate considerable superstition into our religious life. And so we set out to proclaim an enlightened religious faith adequate for the spiritual and moral needs of the nineteen seventies.

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<sup>1</sup>John 8:32

## Chapter 1

### IS THE BIBLE TRUE?

The Bible is the central document of the Christian faith; therefore it is very important that we understand the nature of its authority. We ask, Is it true? The answer is, Yes, its spiritual and moral message for our lives and our world is true! But this does not mean that every sentence in the Bible is to be understood as a literal statement of historical fact. We read the Bible for its inspired religious message, but we misunderstand its nature if we simply read it as we would the evening newspaper, assuming it to be just a chronicle of events.

The late theologian, Nels F. S. Ferré, used to tell how, many years earlier as a student pastor, he visited an untutored woman in the little church he was serving. It was a very rainy day, and he said to his parishoner, "It's an awful day!" The woman replied, "No, the sun is shining." He thought she was kidding, and he joshed with her. But she was hurt and said, "Do you my pastor come to insult me?" The Farmer's Almanac had said that it would be a sunny day, and she went by the book and refused to admit that the sun was not shining. She was a fundamentalist.

There are Biblical fundamentalists too, people who insist on a strictly literal interpretation of the Bible. Since the Bible says the world was created in six days and that the

sun and moon stood still in the sky at the command of Joshua, they accept these things without question, believing that everything in the Bible necessarily happened just that way. Such arbitrary literalism would seem to suggest that the Bible is some kind of a miracle book that is in all things inerrant so that everything it says on all subjects is to be understood as actual fact. This is a misleading distortion, for while the Biblical writers were inspired by God and wrote profound truth, they possessed no infallibility on scientific, political, and social questions. When God speaks through human beings in any age, even though their faith is strong and they are intent on discerning and proclaiming truth, they are never completely free from the biases and thought patterns of their own time. And so in understanding the truth of the Biblical message there is always the sorting-out process of lifting up the significant religious truths that are everlastingly applicable in every age, separating them from the observations and anecdotes of the Biblical narrative.

Remarkable strides have been made in Biblical scholarship in recent years so that today we know things about the Bible that our grandparents never dreamed that it would be possible to know. Textual studies have helped immeasurably in restoring a reliable Biblical text. When we stop to realize that no original text of the Bible is available, but rather only many ancient manuscripts, it becomes clear that these manuscripts have to be studied carefully and compared to es-

tablish the most probable original wording of the Bible. Through the centuries Biblical manuscripts have been tirelessly sought and studied, and the Dead Sea Scrolls have included a particularly rich find of Biblical manuscripts. Sometimes these ancient documents are in poor condition and only fragments are available, but they are carefully pieced together like a jig-saw puzzle. Of course, the older manuscripts carry the most weight in determining an accurate text. Because so much important textual research has been done in recent years, the new translations of the Bible can provide us with a more correct text than earlier versions could.

Scholars have also engaged in critical historical and literary studies in which they have sought to determine who wrote the Biblical books, to whom they were written, when and where they were written, and what circumstances prompted their writing. It is very difficult simply to pick up the Bible and begin to read one of its books without this kind of information. It is like listening to one end of a telephone conversation in which we do not understand the context of what we are hearing. As we learn the movements of ancient Hebrew and early Christian history and begin to discover how the Biblical narrative fits into that story, the Bible comes alive for us. Usually the inspired writers of the Bible were addressing themselves to specific situations. If we know what those situations were, we can more fully comprehend what the Bible is saying.

It is interesting to note that recent archeology has underlined the historical reliability of some of the Old Testament narratives whose historicity had been in doubt. And in recent years there has been renewed interest in a serious study of the development of the theological ideas in the Biblical narrative, a very productive inquiry that has made clear that the religious ideas of a community of faith evolve and mature as the generations pass.

It helps if we think of the Bible as a library rather than a book. The sixty six books of the Bible include many kinds of writing: historical narratives, legends and myths, poetry, proverbs, hymns, laws, prophetic writings, Gospels, letters, and apocalyptic writing that predicts better things to come. It is important, then, with so many kinds of writing in the Bible, that we know what we are reading as we open the Bible to read. The stories of Adam and Eve, of Noah and the Ark, and of Jonah and the Fish are legends; therefore the pertinent question to ask when reading them is not, How could it have happened? but rather, What is the religious message of these legends? And there is no doubt that these stories expound ideas that are among the most important in the Old Testament!

We are dealing with actual history when we read about Moses, about King Saul and King David, and about Nehemiah, even though these narratives have been elaborated because the ancient Hebrews loved to glorify their national and religious

heroes just as we Americans do. The prophets, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, and the others, dealt with the practical political, moral, and religious problems at hand. They were above all realists who knew what the tragic outcome is when people disregard the lordship of God. The Psalmist wrote hymns, the poet who wrote Job set forth a dramatic dialogue about the meaning of suffering, the Gospel writers proclaimed the Good News of Christ's coming, and the Apostle Paul and others wrote remarkable letters in which they shared their faith and dealt with the practical problems of life in the early Church. It should be clear, then, that we must never lump together the entire Bible and consider all parts of it to be in the same category, for it is a library with a vast variety of religious writing in it.

The Bible reflects a pre-scientific world view. Did the Red Sea actually part to let the Israelites through as the Bible suggests? Did an ax head float on the water as the book of II Kings says? Did Elijah go up to heaven in a fiery chariot, and did the swine that the Gospel of Matthew suggests were possessed by demons really stampede down the bank of the Sea of Galilee and drown themselves in the lake? We need to face the fact that the Bible was written in a pre-scientific era when people believed that the earth was flat and stationary and that it was only the sun, the moon, and the stars in the sky that moved. But today we hold a conception of the universe the basis of which was laid down by Copernicus and Galileo and

know that the planets revolve in orbits about the sun. The people of the Biblical period believed in miracles, but we believe rather in natural law. Our astronomy, physics, and biology are not those of the Bible. The Biblical writers, inspired though they were with religious insight, had the handicap of not being acquainted with our present-day scientific knowledge; therefore they believed in miracles and expected their great religious teachers and prophets to perform them. They interpreted events in such a way as to give them a miraculous twist, and, as the stories were told and retold before they were recorded, they frequently picked up a supernatural emphasis that is quite foreign to our experience. Of course, we have to recognize that many of the so-called Biblical miracles are explainable on the basis of modern knowledge and natural phenomena. But perhaps the best way to approach the Biblical miracles is to ask the question, What does the miracle reveal about the way the Jewish people felt about the individual to whom it was attributed? Frequently these miracle stories give true insights into the stature and personalities of the Biblical heroes who were said to have performed them. They picture them as men and women of great faith, profound compassion, unique personal power, and exceptionally attuned to God.

The Bible in some places reflects the social biases of the ancient world. Take the Apostle Paul, for example. When he spoke of the central role of faith, he spoke profoundly.

When he wrote his famous essay on love in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians, he uttered words never to be forgotten: "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."<sup>1</sup> But this same Paul had his blind spots. In the same book of I Corinthians he revealed that he was a male chauvinist. He said, "the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate..."<sup>2</sup> Now you and I know that this is utterly ridiculous, even inconsistent with the Gospel which pictures every person as being of the same intrinsic value and dignity. And yet Paul was a citizen of the first century, and most people of that time believed that women were second class persons. Paul shared their prejudice and never realized that it was at variance with the Gospel that he professed. Every now and then we confront this type of ancient world prejudice in the Bible, stated sometimes by even the greatest heroes of the Bible. Every person is to some extent captive of the shortsightedness of his own generation; therefore we should not be surprised or dismayed that this was true of the inspired Biblical writers.

Another important fact to be kept in mind is that the Bible was written over a period of more than one thousand years, and there are different levels of theological and ethical maturity in it. It traces the process by which the Jews

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<sup>1</sup>I Corinthians 13:13      <sup>2</sup>I Corinthians 14:34



moved from rather child-like religious conceptions to mature spiritual insights. Think how their understanding of the nature of God developed as the centuries passed. In the Garden of Eden story in Genesis God is conceived in bodily form, walking in the garden in the cool of the evening and from whom Adam could hide by simply stepping behind a tree. And Moses understood God as a tribal deity, making a covenant with one people, the Hebrews, but not the least concerned about the Egyptians, the Canaanites, or anyone else. Then in the prophets came a fuller awakening to the fact that God is a God of justice and love and the Lord of all peoples. And ultimately in the New Testament God is revealed in and through Christ as the loving Presence in whom "we live and move and have our being."<sup>1</sup>

Or consider the development of their ethical insight during the Biblical period. If we should want guidance on what to do when someone strikes us, the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy says, "Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."<sup>2</sup> But six hundred and fifty years later Jesus said something very different: "But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also..."<sup>3</sup> Jesus had moved far beyond the earlier idea that justice meant an eye for an eye.

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<sup>1</sup>Acts 17:28

<sup>2</sup>Deuteronomy 19:21

<sup>3</sup>Matthew 5:39

For Him selfless love was required for the reconciliation of human relationships. Some of these seeming inconsistencies in the Bible are not inconsistencies at all but rather different levels in the developing theological and ethical maturity of the long period during which the Bible was written.

When we say that the Bible is true, we mean that its authoritative truth for our lives and our world is in the religious message it expounds. It is really the story of humankind's encounter with God and an exposition of what we have learned thereby. Professor Leonard Hodgson has said, "the Bible is the record of God's education of our spiritual ancestors in knowledge of Himself..."<sup>1</sup> As we have noted, not all of the Bible is literal history, its writers had a pre-scientific view of the world and expressed some of the narrow views of their time, and there is an unevenness about its theological and ethical views. This is because the Bible was written over so many centuries that some of the earliest passages reflect quite an immature stage of religious development while other later passages express well-developed theological wisdom. But in spite of all these problems, the spiritual and ethical content of the Bible is true. It is not because the Bible proclaims it, but rather because it checks with the experience of humankind through the centuries. We have often tried to disregard the Biblical directives and experimented with alterna-

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<sup>1</sup>Leonard Hodgson, Christian Faith and Practice (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 30.

tives, but when we have done so, we have always run into trouble. The religious experience of our spiritual forebears that is recorded in the Bible is a body of theological and ethical material that is absolutely authoritative and binding upon us all!

The Bible is the record of what happens to people and nations when they come under the full impact of a confrontation with God. Take Moses. He resisted the task that God had for him but reluctantly finally accepted it. He led the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage and delivered to them the laws of God by which they were to live. Then there was Elijah, a rather emotionally unstable man who sometimes was very exhilarated and at other times deeply depressed. But, inspired by God, he stood up to his king to insist that even a king must abide by God's justice. Elijah also dramatically appealed to his countrymen to abandon their pagan worship of Baal and to return to God in faithfulness. Among the great prophets was a shepherd of Tekoa named Amos who sensed so deeply that God spoke through him that he said, "Thus saith the Lord..." as he expounded the truths of prophetic religion, explaining that just fulfilling the rituals of religion was not enough; people were to practice justice as well. There was also Jesus of Nazareth who responded more fully to God than any other person of whom we have any knowledge, committing His life totally to His heavenly Father, and so He was the Christ, the supreme revealer of God's redeeming love. And remember the tentmaker

of Tarsus, Paul, who never enjoyed robust health, but God did remarkable things through him too as he interpreted to the entire Mediterranean world the significance of Christ.

The Bible is the narrative that sets forth clearly in concrete historical circumstances how God works redemptively in the events of people and nations. As the story unfolds, it illustrates what God is like--a God of fatherly love who wills our fulfillment, what people are like--children of God who desperately need the spiritual fulfillment that God offers, and what life may be like--the joy of Christian salvation! It points out how essential faith, love, and justice are. And so the Bible is our story, not just about Moses, Elijah, Amos, and Paul, but also about the meaning and potential of our lives. Frederick Buechner writes that the Bible is a book "about life the way it really is...it is a book about us... One way or another the story we find in the Bible is our own story."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking - A Theological ABC (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 9.

## Chapter 2

### WHAT IS THE NATURE OF GOD?

Without a doubt the most important question that we may ask is, What is the nature of God? Everything else depends on that. If God were hostile to human life, there would be no hope for us. But since God is unfailingly on the side of our human fulfillment, life is filled with high possibilities, and we are right in saying that our Christian faith is Good News!

We need to begin this inquiry into the nature of God with great humility, realizing that we with our finite minds cannot possibly fully comprehend the infinite God. We can only enumerate some of the qualities of God that become clear to us in our quest; nevertheless we may learn enough to verify the central Biblical affirmations about God. An eighteenth century German mystic, Gerhard Tersteegen, said, "A God understood, a God comprehended, is no God." If we could completely understand the deity and neatly package Him intellectually, He would not be the infinite eternal God. The Apostle Paul said, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"<sup>1</sup> We recognize the limits of our human capacity to know God, and yet we are determined to discover all that we

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<sup>1</sup>Romans 11:33

can know about Him.

Where should we look for God? The ancient Greeks suggested that real being exists in its perfect and absolute form beyond the course of history, out somewhere completely beyond our experience. And Christian theology has been greatly influenced by classical Greek philosophy and has found it easy to take over this idea and expound the Christian faith in these terms--that God is out there beyond us. But Christian thought has always said that God is in here too, within the realm of our spiritual experience. The two important words here are "transcendent" and "immanent." A transcendent God is beyond our knowing, removed from our experience, distant, existing in another realm, and an immanent God is vivid in our experience, dwells in our hearts, influences the on-going events of history. The new element in a great deal of twentieth century thought is the growing denial of, or, at least, disregard of the transcendent realm. Our science, philosophy, and literature focuses our attention mainly on the natural realm, and we have developed a "this world approach" to the understanding of life rather than an "other world approach." We tend to study the facts of life right here and now rather than look beyond history for the answers to life's mysteries. Professor Langdon Gilkey, who has beautifully analyzed this entire situation in his book, Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language, says,

The modern spirit is thus radically this-worldly. We tend not to see our life and its meanings as stretching

out toward an eternal order beyond this existence, or our fortunes as dependent upon a transcendent ruler of time and history. We view our life as here, and our destiny as beginning with birth and ending with the grave, as confined in space and time to this world in nature and among men.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever reality, knowledge, or value there may be anywhere lies in the immediate, the here and now, in this world which we can sense and manipulate.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis on the world of our own experience has had a profound effect on our theological quest. While we recognize that God undoubtedly is "out there" transcending our experience, that is something that we can only speculate about. But it is God in His creative impact upon the historical process that we experience and observe, whom we may identify and describe. This is why the theologically liberal Christian tends to turn his attention primarily to the observation of God's acts in the course of observable events. While God may be everywhere, we can learn best of His redemptive role in concrete circumstances that can be studied. We do not minimize the transcendence of God, we simply realize that we may study His ways most dependably in His immanent role in our history.

Another way to say this is that the idea of the supernatural is rather meaningless, for everything we experience or may learn about is a part of the natural realm. Therefore we look for God in the world of nature and the natural course of

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<sup>1</sup>Langdon Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

events, not in some sphere above or apart from the natural order. Professor J. S. Whale has said,

Thinking men cannot believe that the many signs of design in nature are a sheer accident, having no ultimate significance. The universe seems orderly rather than disorderly, in that it is always realizing 'ends' which only an excessive scepticism will dismiss as meaningless. Confronted with nature's indubitable purposiveness at all its levels, man cannot believe that it is all 'spots and jumps', an unmeaning chaos.<sup>1</sup>

Nature is orderly, balanced, and integrated; there is pattern, structure and relatedness. The universe around us is clearly not the product of simply billions of atoms going it blind. In fact, it is so dependable in its cause and effect relationships that we may formulate "natural laws" to describe its functioning. It is not beyond this universe that we find God, but rather actively at work in this universe. The Bible declares that God is the God of nature. The Prophet Amos beheld God in the constellations of stars, the ordering of day and night, and the falling of the rain. He said, "He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name..." God is at work in the processes of nature.

But, even more important, God is the God of people.

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<sup>1</sup>J. S. Whale, Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: University Press, 1956), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>Amos 5:8



The Bible affirms that the same God whose activity is apparent in nature is active redemptively in the lives of people. It really was a revolutionary idea for the Old Testament to picture God saying to Moses at Mt. Horeb, "'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'"<sup>1</sup> Yahweh, as they called Him in the Old Testament, was not just a sun god or a storm god or a god who made the crops grow, but He actually cared about people and sought to save them. This is at the heart of the Biblical message--God values people, calls them to obedience, and seeks to liberate them for Life. In fact, because of God's love for His people and His righteous will for the human family, and because it is possible for us to enter into a personal faith-prayer relationship with Him, it is most helpful to think of Him in personal terms. The Bible does this. The Psalmist likened God to a good shepherd who tenderly cares for His sheep: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."<sup>2</sup> And Jesus applied the category of fatherhood to God to emphasize how personally approachable God is. In teaching His followers how to pray, He said, "'Our Father who art in heaven...'"<sup>3</sup>

There are some problems in all of this. To call God "Father" and to use the pronoun "He" seems to suggest that God is male rather than female. Of course, it is ridiculous to suggest that God has a sexual identity. We could very appro-

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus 3:6

<sup>2</sup>Psalm 23:1

<sup>3</sup>Matthew 6:9

priately call God "Mother" and use the pronoun "She," for we are thinking of all of the fine qualities of parenthood when we think of God in personal terms. It is unfortunate that there is no personal pronoun in our language that is neither male nor female, and it would be awkward to say "He/She." And it would be inaccurate to refer to God with the impersonal pronoun "It." Therefore we keep using the words "Father," "He," and "Him" for God but do so uneasily because God is not limited to maleness as they suggest. Yet how else can we keep making the point that God is personal?

Still another difficulty in projecting personhood at God is that personhood is a human category, and by applying it to God we may encourage anthropomorphic thinking about God. Some people, in hearing that God is personal, may immediately think of a deity in bodily form, which is a terrible error. But what can we do? We simply have to use the ideas and words that are available to us, always realizing the inadequacy of any descriptions we human beings may use to describe God. What we say only hints at His greatness, and He is always infinitely more than our words or symbols may suggest. Professor John H. Otwell has written, "Personality is the highest mode of existence known to us... It also has a vividness and concreteness about it which helps convey the reality of the God to whom it is attributed."<sup>1</sup> And so, in spite of the problems, we keep

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<sup>1</sup>John H. Otwell, Ground to Stand On (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 93.

thinking of God in personal terms. It surely has special meaning to us in our prayer lives.

How does God touch our lives and world? He functions dynamically and purposefully in the universe. God's creative impact upon the course of history may be observed from moment to moment in the process of becoming. As life moves forward in time, everything is changing, and God is the creative element in that change that fosters the emergence of higher values, the realization of significant possibilities. It is in the continual process of constructive transformation in the forward movement of events that God's redemptive thrust is observable in human life and nature. God is that force at the heart of things that seeks unflinching and eternally to fulfill the highest possibilities for good. This is very much a "this world" approach to our study of God, because it emphasizes the immanence of God in the unfolding events of each day as God matures the human spirit, builds values into interpersonal relationships, and fosters the upward thrust of history. No one can deny the reality of this God whose saving action is a part of our daily experience and readily apparent in an overview of history.

And this is really Biblical, for the Bible sees God as the crucial factor where the change for good is occurring. It would be a mistake to think of God simply as a Creator who set the universe in motion long ago and then ceased creating, only to let it go on its own momentum. Rather God everlasting-

ly keeps creating--lifting nature in the evolutionary process and saving people. God may be seen in the great events of the Biblical narrative, supremely in His incarnation in Jesus Christ in whom His love and will are most clearly revealed. And God may be seen at work in your life and mine, in the work of His Church, in the influence of all people of good will who seek to facilitate the emergence of His kingdom in the world.

God's creativity is so completely dependable and consistent, so unfailingly on the side of the spiritual fulfillment of every person, that the word "love" best expresses His nature. As the New Testament book of I John says, "...God is love."<sup>1</sup> And this love is fully given to all people, as Jesus made clear in His Parable of the Laborers.<sup>2</sup> In that story a farmer went to the market place one morning at six o'clock and hired laborers to work in his vineyard for a piece of silver worth about twenty cents, the common wage for a day's labor of twelve hours in that ancient world. Then three hours later he hired some more laborers in the market place and promised to pay them a just wage. He did the same at noon, at three o'clock in the afternoon, and at five o'clock, just one hour before quitting time, promising all of them that he would pay them justly. At six o'clock he told his foreman to call in the laborers and pay them, and he paid them all one piece of silver, or twenty cents, even though some had worked twelve

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<sup>1</sup>I John 4:8

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 20:1-16

hours and the others nine, six, three, and even one hour. There was grumbling and complaining from those who had worked all day in the hot sun and received the same wage as those who had worked only an hour. The farmer answered their complaint by saying to the unhappy workers, "I choose to give to this last as I give to you." The Phillips translation<sup>1</sup> puts it, "It is my wish to give the latecomers as much as I give you." Clearly this is not a story about labor-management relations. Rather it is a parable that makes clear that God loves all of His children alike, everyone equally, the early arrival and the latecomer. He does not hold back His grace and love from anyone but rather gives His love completely to all, even though they have not deserved it. God loves those who have been faithful Christians through the years and those who rather later "come to themselves" and pursue the life of Christian discipleship. God's love is equally for all.

Sometimes people get almost sentimental about the love of God and forget that it is a morally responsible love that requires righteousness. God's love would not be moral if it did not demand justice. If a parent loves a child with a mature love, that parent will necessarily set certain limits on the child's behavior and will place certain demands for righteousness upon the child. What the loving parent does to the child, God in His righteousness does with all of us, His child-

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<sup>1</sup>Bible. The New Testament in Modern English, tr. by J. B. Phillips (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

ren--He requires righteousness. How does God judge us? Not in any whimsical sense, not in a vindictive or punitive way. Rather the judgement of God works itself out in the cause and effect relationships of the moral realm. This is not only a world of natural law in which certain physical truths inescapably apply, but it is also a world of moral order in which certain spiritual principles unalterably affect us. The Bible has tried to codify these moral and spiritual truths of life in the Ten Commandments, in the book of Deuteronomy, and in the Sermon on the Mount. Take, for example, the law of love: love always fosters fruitful human relationships, and hate always destroys human values. If we live in love, we are likely to be rewarded with loving friends; but if we live in hate, we are likely to have to endure hostile enemies. This is simply the way the moral order functions. As the Apostle Paul said, "...whatever a man sows, that he will also reap."<sup>1</sup> That does not mean that we can blame all human misfortune on immorality, but it does mean that we cannot disregard the fundamental moral truths of life without tragic consequences. The "judgement of God" is the experiencing of the direct results of our disobedience. In this sense people and nations are judged by God's righteous will. As James Russell Lowell wrote,

In vain we call old notions fudge,  
And bend our conscience to our dealing;  
The Ten Commandments will not budge,  
And stealing will continue stealing.

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<sup>1</sup>Galatians 6:7

Because God's holy love is absolutely righteous and just, it cannot allow us to exploit other people, to destroy spiritual values, and to shatter human justice, for those who would be our victims are God's children too. Therefore necessarily the same love of God that saves and liberates us also judges our unrighteousness. God loves and judges, that is, requires righteousness so that we do not destroy ourselves and our human brothers and sisters, but rather strive to live together in peace and justice.

It is important to discuss the Christian view of the Trinity because so many people have some struggle with this concept. The word "Trinity" does not appear in the New Testament because the idea of the Trinity was not a fully developed doctrine in the New Testament period, even though it was implied in that we read in the New Testament about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed, "'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me...'"<sup>1</sup> The presence of divinity in Jesus is referred to in Paul's words to the Christians at Corinth: "...God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself..."<sup>2</sup> and in the Gospel of John: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..."<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit is described at Jesus' baptism: "And when he came up out of the water, immediately

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 26:39

<sup>2</sup>II Corinthians 5:19

<sup>3</sup>John 1:14

he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove..."<sup>1</sup> We also read of it on the occasion of the first Pentecost as one hundred and twenty of Christ's followers were gathered in Jerusalem, and the book of Acts says, "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit..."<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul summarized it in the blessing with which he closed the book of II Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."<sup>3</sup> We read about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the New Testament, but the Trinity was not yet a fully developed doctrine.

Then in the first part of the third century a Christian thinker by the name of Tertullian was struggling to formulate a doctrine of the Trinity, and by the beginning of the fifth century St. Augustine was distinctly Trinitarian. These theologians, and others throughout the centuries, have not been speaking of tri-theism, not three gods, but of vigorous monotheism, one God manifested in three ways.

Part of the confusion about the doctrine of the Trinity is over the fact that when the Latin theologians spoke of God being three persons, they did not mean persons in the modern sense. The Latin word, "persona," means mask. The actors wore these personae, for example, in the Colosseum. They were

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<sup>1</sup>Mark 1:10

<sup>2</sup>Acts 2:4

<sup>3</sup>II Corinthians 13:14



moulded and painted to represent different characters and different moods so that one actor during a play could wear several masks or personae. It was natural, therefore, that these theologians should take the word, "persona," to convey the fact that one God could play three roles, could wear three masks. God could be understood as the Father-Creator, as Christ the Revealer, and as the indwelling Spirit. This still makes sense to us today--that the one God has revealed Himself in three roles. God is a triune God, a three-in-one God. We may know Him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Stop to consider for a moment what Good News our Christian understanding of God is! He is in our very midst always, closer than the air we breathe. He cares about people and is personal. His nature is love, and He is unfailingly about the redemptive task of fostering the highest possibilities in our lives and our world. And God's love is moral, always on the side of righteousness and judging us when we fall short. We know Him as Father, as the risen Christ, and as the living Spirit.

## Chapter 3

## ARE WE SINNERS?

Are we human beings sinners? The answer to that question is Yes. But this question and answer raises many larger issues that must be discussed before we can understand what is meant when we say that we are sinners. The Psalmist wrote, "what is man that thou art mindful of him..."<sup>1</sup> Of course, the word "man" is used here in the generic sense, meaning all people. We are inquiring about the nature of human persons. It is very important that we should understand our human condition if we would know our relationship with God.

Mark Twain once jokingly said that God invented people because He was disappointed with monkeys. What Mark Twain was really saying is that there is a difference between people and monkeys. As the zoologist makes clear, a human being is an animal and belongs to the animal kingdom. In fact, we are mammals and called homo sapiens. Physically we are enough like some of the other mammals that students may dissect other mammals to study the bodily processes of human beings. Medicines are tried first on dogs, and surgeons tried heart transplants on dogs before they attempted them on people. Actually we are quite similar physically to the other higher mammals.

Yet we are more than monkeys. The Bible emphasizes

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<sup>1</sup>Psalm 8:4

the uniqueness of human persons in the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him..."<sup>1</sup> This passage has been widely misunderstood, considered by some to suggest that we are made in the physical image of God, and therefore since we have bodies, it has been falsely argued that God must have a body too. But the passage means spiritual image. We do not believe in an anthropomorphic God, a God with a physical body like ours. God is rather a living personal Spirit. And, as this passage from Genesis suggests, only we among all of the animals of the creation share with God a capacity for the spiritual and are self-conscious beings who can reflect on the meaning of existence and grapple with ethical and moral questions. Only we are endowed with the ability to make spiritual and ethical choices, to say Yes or No to the call of God. And so the Bible keeps emphasizing the intrinsic worth of human persons. We are understood as children of God, created to be in a unique fellowship with Him, fashioned in His spiritual image.

And the Bible makes clear that human life was created good. Running through the creation legend in the first chapter of Genesis is the repeated refrain, "And God saw that it was good." But after the creation of human life there is the more emphatic indication of God's approval: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 1:27

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 1:31

God values persons and loves them, and the Bible outlines how He constantly takes the initiative to save them. In the Old Testament we read how God raised up a leader, Moses, to deliver His people from their bondage, and in the New Testament the new deliverer is Jesus Christ through whom God offers liberation. As John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

If God, as the Bible depicts the story, got everything off to a good start and human beings were good, how then did the problem of evil enter history? The legend of Adam and Eve sets forth the classic Biblical statement about how sin came into the picture. Man and woman were given the gift of life and placed in a garden that held out the highest possibilities for their fulfillment. Only one thing was expected of them--obedience! They were not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But instead of being satisfied with the good life to which God had called them and be obedient, they decided to take matters into their own hands and play god themselves. This was their downfall. Notice the symbolism here--they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because they wanted to possess complete knowledge and be omniscient like God. They sought to usurp God's role rather than to acknowledge His sovereignty over them. And so they said No! to God, rejected His will for their lives, alienated themselves from God, and experienced a tragic broken-

ness in their lives. The thing to make clear is that God did not introduce sin into the situation. Rather human persons did by their free denial of God's lordship and their attempt to go it alone. It was then that everything went wrong because God's will and purpose were frustrated.

Now, of course, the Adam and Eve story is an ancient legend, and yet it is one of the truest stories in the Bible because it is the vehicle for the telling of a profound truth --that God created human life to be good, but we human beings through our disobedience have chosen to reject God's plan, and the results have been tragic beyond words.

This story of Adam and Eve is really our story. We too have been given the gift of life, placed in a world potentially as beautiful as a garden, and life is filled with remarkable possibilities for good. But we too nibble at the forbidden fruit. Instead of consistently accepting the lordship of God over our lives and seeking to attune our lives to His will, we often settle for less. We make false gods of our own selfish interests, our money, our possessions, and our nation, and these crowd the true God out of our lives. Dr. Daniel D. Williams once wrote,

...man in his freedom can set something less than God's will in the center of life and give his allegiance to that. Sin is man's creation of a false God, and a flight from the true God. Its consequence is the tearing of the holy fabric of life. It is a plunge into the abyss where the human spirit feeds only upon itself and destroys itself. We cannot understand the depth of the Christian doctrine of sin if we give to it only a moral connotation. To break the basic laws of justice and decency is sin indeed... But sin has its roots in some-

thing which is more than the will to break the law. The core of sin is our making ourselves the center of life, rather than accepting the holy God as the creator.<sup>1</sup>

Many people have the mistaken idea that sin is simply bad behavior. Of course, it is sinful to destroy human values, to hurt other people, and to impose injustice; however the fundamental sin is to reject God's reign over us, for it is from this basic wrong that all other evils flow. It is when we turn our backs on God's purpose and fail to fulfill the requirements of His love that we become calloused about social injustice. We then find it easy to condone a life style that allows our extravagant consumption at the expense of others who struggle along in poverty. We readily overlook the problems of the powerless minorities and refuse to question the morality of policies that work for our benefit but exploit others. This asserting of our own self-devised goals in defiance of God's plan for our lives and world results in the alienation we experience in our lives and our society.

All this does not mean that people are all bad. Far from it. As we have said, human life is created by God to be good, but it is we who have perverted it by often saying No rather than Yes to God! We see a kind of schizophrenia in ourselves: we are not one thing but two--split in our loyalties. Along side our altruistic motives are selfish ones; beside our high ideals there is a willingness to experiment with

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<sup>1</sup>Source unknown.

evil. Depth psychology reveals how many factors are at work within the human psyche.

We remember with joy the heroic moments in which people have risen to rapture and praise, acknowledging God as Lord and rejoicing in the opportunity to praise Him. As the Psalmist said, "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth."<sup>1</sup> But, on the other hand, there are times when we have tried to build without God. Do you remember the story of the building of the tower of Babel?<sup>2</sup> The people decided to build a city and a huge high tower that was to reach into the heavens. And why did they set out to build? To make a name for themselves! they said, to satisfy their own pride. The point of the story is that they sought to build without God, and therefore the entire project came to naught. According to the Biblical narrative God confused them by causing them to speak many different languages so that they could no longer understand each other and work together in the construction. Because of their incomprehensible babbling at each other, it was called the tower of Babel. This ancient story makes clear that people cannot build enduringly without God; whenever we leave God out of our plans, everything collapses!

The Biblical view of people is very realistic. It is not carried away with sentimental optimism about our goodness,

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<sup>1</sup>Psalm 34:1

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 11:1-9

but neither is it bogged down with hopeless pessimism about our evil. Surely perfection is beyond our grasp, but we are capable of considerable righteousness and idealism. Yet we are inclined to misuse our free will and decide against God. It is interesting to contrast this realistic Christian view of our spiritual frailties with the Marxist optimism about people that suggests that with their hoped-for completion of the communist revolution and the just distribution of the material goods of the world, the perfect society would result. At least orthodox communist doctrine naively suggests that once every person has his fair share of the world's goods, everyone would live together happily, satisfied, and in good will, seeking the common good. In fact, the need for government would wither away. But Christianity counters, Don't fool yourselves! Even if it were possible fairly to distribute the world's wealth at any given moment, human nature, being what it is, would mean that it would not be long before some people would again have taken more than their share, and others would be going without. People are not simply altruistic. We are, as we have been saying, a mixture of high possibilities and sinful inclinations.

Christians, therefore, can never minimize the fact of evil. While we surely do not believe in a devil in the sense of a little red creature with a pointed tail and a spear in hand, we do acknowledge the reality of evil. This evil is by nature tragically destructive. Any psychiatrist will testify



that hate, for example, is the most destructive of emotions, and we know that to be true. Sin destroys and ultimately is self-destructive and therefore has no real staying power. Judas' sin not only resulted in the crucifixion of Christ but also the suicide of Judas himself. Hitler's treachery not only brought catastrophe and death to untold millions, but it ultimately destroyed Hitler and his cohorts too. These are not isolated cases, for whenever we become seriously engulfed in evil, it threatens our destruction also. Martin Luther had a keen sense of the reality of evil and in his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," wrote, "For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal." The power of evil to frustrate the holy purpose of God is great indeed, and we may readily become victims of the tyranny of our sins if we casually choose to follow something less than God.

At the same time we recognize the tragic suffering that evil imposes, we must be careful to point out that not all human agony is the result of sin. Human tyranny and injustice impose great misery, and a great deal of the suffering of our world could be alleviated if all humankind would learn to live according to God's will, in love and good will with one another. But there is also suffering that results from accidents, from illnesses, and from natural catastrophes. People may be injured for life in automobile accidents that

no one intended, may suffer from cancer or heart ailments through no fault of anybody, and may be killed in earthquakes or tornadoes. We must not carelessly suggest that all human tragedy is the direct result of sin; nevertheless a great deal of suffering is, and it is the kind of suffering that could be eliminated from life if we would simply make an about-face spiritually!

Jesus made clear that it is very important for us to realize our true need and repent! He told the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican<sup>1</sup> in which both a church leader and a tax collector went into the temple to pray. The Pharisee had a good record of pious behavior--fasting and tithing, but he thought he "had arrived" spiritually. And so he proudly thanked God for what he supposed was his spiritual superiority: "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men..." The publican, on the other hand, was fully aware of his many sins, and in deep humility he "beat his breast" and said, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Jesus then said a very amazing thing--that the publican rather than the Pharisee went down to his house justified. The Pharisee was proud, arrogant, and self-satisfied; such a person is likely to do very little growing spiritually. But the publican was honest about his deep spiritual need and penitently prayed for God's forgiving grace. That is the kind of humble person who can truly experience a

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 18:10-14

personal transformation. In the first of the beatitudes Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...",<sup>1</sup> and Edgar J. Goodspeed translated those words, "Blessed are those who feel their spiritual need..."<sup>2</sup> That makes the meaning clearer. It is a blessed and good thing to acknowledge our true spiritual need, to recognize that we stand before God alienated because we have broken our fellowship with Him by our rejection of His will. We need to be as honest as the publican of the parable was, to come clean and confess our true spiritual need to the God whose forgiving grace is unfailing.

There is always the tendency to think that we can pull ourselves up by our own boot straps, that we can disentangle ourselves from the strong hold of evil. Often people argue that we can simply educate ourselves out of our inadequacies, and all will be well. Of course, we all readily agree that human ignorance and illiteracy are handicaps to the good life, and education provides know-how and power. But these may be put either to good or evil use. The educated criminal is more dangerous than the uneducated one. Education, as indispensable as it is, is not the whole answer. Nor can science and technology save us. The same chemistry that produces the wonder drugs to heal human disease provides the addicting drugs on which the sick drug culture thrives. The same nuclear power

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 5:3

<sup>2</sup>Bible. The Complete Bible An American Translation  
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929)

that opens up endless new possibilities for human good can also inflict catastrophic harm. And so, while we all heartily encourage education, scientific research, and technological progress, we know that they must be ethically used if they are to benefit the world.

Clearly what we need are "saved people" to guarantee that we shall make the most ethically responsible use of our skills and power. What do we mean by "saved?" We mean saved from the alienation we experience when we violate our personal fellowship with God by rejecting His will, saved from our sense of loneliness and isolation when in selfishness and hostility we destroy any feeling of community with other people, saved from the meaninglessness that results when we willfully try to go it alone in life. Life's tragic fragmentation caused by our disobedience must be overcome so that we can be restored to a creative fellowship with God and with one another, so that we can again find meaning, joy, and victory.

Are we sinners? Yes, in our misuse of our freedom whereby we have often said No rather than Yes to God. And so we have broken the sacred personal relationship between ourselves and God. That does not mean that life does not have good possibilities, for it does. As children of God we have intrinsic worth, but that makes our spiritual downfall all the more intolerable. And so we seek to acknowledge and face up to our true human condition so that we may move on to repentance and faith and to the saving activity of God in Jesus Christ.

## Chapter 4

### WHAT ABOUT JESUS AS TEACHER AND MESSIAH?

Let us turn now to a study of the life, teachings, and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. What do we really know about His life? What are the central themes of His teaching? Was He truly the messiah?

Most Biblical scholars agree that we cannot be sure about the historical details of Jesus' birth. In Biblical times they usually had very little interest in the childhood and boyhood of a great man but rather recorded the important events in a hero's adult life. They then often left it to later chroniclers to imagine the circumstances of his birth. This probably was true in the case of Jesus, meaning that the birth accounts are likely legendary. It is significant that the first of the Gospels to be written, Mark, makes no mention of Jesus' birth but begins with His adult baptism. It was not until the Gospels of Matthew and Luke appeared a few years later that there are narratives about His nativity, and the two stories differ significantly. Furthermore the very nature of these stories adds weight to the conclusion that they are probably later legends that were inserted at the beginning of the narrative of Jesus' life and that the actual historical account begins with the story of His adult years.

We can understand the reason that the Gospel writers were anxious to place the birth of this Nazarene in Bethlehem,

because that was the city of David, and it was therefore right that the messiah who was a direct descendant of King David should be born there. The humble circumstances of Jesus' birth add beauty to the story and seem to say that this God-sent King would be strong in treasures of the spirit rather than endowed with royal trappings. The shepherds' coming may symbolize the common people's acknowledgement of the messiah's birth, and the fact that the wisemen from the East paid homage suggests that the best minds of the time knew who this Child was. Even the star in the sky stood over the holy place, indicating that nature too rejoiced in the Savior's coming.

There has been a great deal of discussion about whether Jesus was born of a virgin. There seems to have been two traditions about this even in New Testament times--those who affirmed the virgin birth and those who did not. The Gospel of Matthew says, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit..."<sup>1</sup> And the Gospel of Luke pictures the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary informing her that she will be the mother of Jesus and that the Child will be conceived through the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> But, on the other hand, in both of these Gospels the genealogy of Jesus is traced back through Joseph, which would make no sense unless Joseph were the fa-

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 1:18

<sup>2</sup>Luke 1:35

ther of Jesus. And when Jesus returned to His boyhood town of Nazareth and preached in the synagogue, they said of Him, "Is not this Joseph's son?"<sup>1</sup> Here as in many places in the Gospels there are varying viewpoints recorded side by side, indicating that these narratives in their present form are the result of the bringing together of various anecdotes and accounts about Jesus. We need to study the Biblical record prayerfully and draw our own conclusions on subjects like the virgin birth and realize that our faith does not stand or fall on such issues. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that many earlier Biblical heroes were born under unusual circumstances; therefore it was natural that some should have expected the messiah Himself to be.

But there can be no question that Jesus did live. The New Testament is the principal historical source, and while some of the details are obscure, the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth is beyond question. Peter summarized the story thus:

...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him... They put him to death by hanging him on a tree...<sup>2</sup>

I believe it was Dr. George A. Buttrick who said that He was "painfully human" and went on to say that He worked at a bench with weariness in His muscles like our weariness, with blood in His veins like our blood. Deceitful men cheated Him, careless men forgot to pay Him for His work. He lived in an oc-

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 4:22

<sup>2</sup>Acts 10:38-39

cupied land so that He had to decide if He would join in an open insurrection against the Roman tyranny, or work with the underground, or walk some idealistic road. Life for Him was as hard as the nails in His shop and the nails in His cross. He was considered a trouble-maker, and because empires do not tolerate trouble-makers, He was executed. Could any life story be more painfully human than that?

Jesus was a man of phenomenal spiritual power. Although He struggled with the same temptations that you and I do, He always seemed to emerge triumphant, stronger for having undergone the struggle. He was a teacher of authority and effectiveness who took the greatest truths of His religious heritage and taught them with freshness and power. He was a rabbi who dealt creatively with people. He brought new hope into the lives of corrupt men and immoral women. He had a healing, therapeutic influence upon those who were emotionally and physically ill, and His love and concern made an impact upon all who knew Him. People were profoundly affected by this Jesus of Nazareth. Some said, "'No man ever spoke like this man!'"<sup>1</sup> After witnessing the death of Jesus on the cross and what followed, even the hardened Roman centurion was so deeply moved that he exclaimed, "'Truly this was a Son of God!'"<sup>2</sup>

Jesus charged His followers: "But seek first his king-

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<sup>1</sup>John 7:46

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 27:54



dom and his righteousness...'<sup>1</sup> The kingdom of God comes first and is to be sought above all else. What did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? He meant the reign of God, living under the sovereignty of God. Wherever or whenever people accept God's rule over their lives and acknowledge His lordship, there the kingdom of God is. The kingdom of God, then, is not a place but a quality of life; it is that dimension of life a person experiences as he or she submits to God's will. And so Jesus realized that His circle of followers who were seeking to live in commitment and faith were already experiencing to some extent the kingdom, and therefore He said, "...the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."<sup>2</sup> or as the King James Version puts it, "...the kingdom of God is within you." The kingdom can be experienced here and now! It grows like a mustard seed, Jesus said, from small beginnings to greatness. It is like a priceless pearl, more valuable than anything else a person can possess. But, even though the kingdom of God can be experienced here in this life, it can only be partially realized in this world. Our human limitations and spiritual frailties make it unlikely that there will ever be a time in human history when all people will universally acknowledge God's lordship and commit themselves to follow God in every thought and deed. Jesus, seeing this problem, shared with His first century contemporaries the belief that God would

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 6:33

<sup>2</sup>Luke 17:21

soon miraculously intervene, call history to a halt, judge everyone, and then establish His kingdom fully. In fact, Jesus began His ministry with a call to repentance because He believed that God's miraculous establishment of His kingdom was very near: "'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.'"<sup>1</sup> But the world did not come to an end as Jesus and many of His contemporaries had thought it would, for here we are nineteen and a half centuries later, and life goes on on this planet. And we do not believe that God will abruptly terminate life on the earth, for all of the evidence is that God's role in nature and human history is orderly and according to what we have come to call "the laws of nature."

How then will God's kingdom ultimately be fully consummated? Many of us believe that we shall experience it fully only in the life to come, in our life beyond the grave. Jesus, as He stood on trial before Pilate, said, "'My kingship is not of this world...'"<sup>2</sup> The full realization of the kingdom belongs to the heavenly realm beyond death. God's kingdom, then, is both present and future--present in that it may be experienced in the hearts of the faithful now, but future in that its full consummation awaits us in eternal life. However Jesus challenged us to seek it constantly in this life committing ourselves to God as completely as we are capable of doing.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark 1:15

<sup>2</sup>John 18:36

When He called for religious dedication, sometimes He said, Seek the kingdom, and other times He said, Come after Me. But, however Jesus put it, it is apparent that He meant the same thing--He was urgently calling for the consecration of our lives to the way of God.

Jesus taught the highest ethics in the Bible. There is nothing like His Sermon on the Mount anywhere else in religious literature. Biblical scholars believe that probably Jesus did not deliver this entire sermon on one occasion because it is unlikely that all of its profound ethical truths could have been gathered up into a single sermon even by a person of Jesus' stature. Likely these great teachings of Jesus were drawn together by the author of the Gospel of Matthew, combined into a single document, given an introduction and conclusion, and then considered a single sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. Whether it was all spoken on one occasion or on several is unimportant, however. The fact that is important is that these were the truths that Jesus taught. And where did He get them? From His Old Testament tradition. Most of the ethical principles expounded here had been uttered before in one form or another in the Law or the Prophets. But Jesus took the greatest elements of His heritage and put them together and taught them with freshness, insight, and power.

He said that the spiritually happy people are the poor in spirit, the meek, the pure in heart, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are even willing to

be persecuted for righteousness' sake. These are the attitudes that accompany a sincere religious faith. He went on to say that we should love our neighbors, but not our neighbors only, but our enemies as well! We are to abandon "even Stephen" justice--an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and learn to turn the other cheek. We should not be anxious about what we eat, wear, and possess, for our religious commitment comes first.

The ethic of love runs through Jesus' teachings. If we learn to fulfill the requirements of love in all of our relationships, we shall be well on our way in the Christian life. The sensitivity, selflessness, outgoing concern, and sacrifice that love demands of us is not easy, but it is a part of the life style of a true Christian. And love requires a reconciling, forgiving spirit. One day Peter asked Jesus how many times he was obliged to forgive his brother when he sinned against him, seven times? Jesus replied, "'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'"<sup>1</sup> In other words, always!

Probably Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan best summarizes how Jesus expected His followers to deal with other people. It is a particularly hard story for church leaders because, as you will remember, it was a priest and Levite who did not think that they had time to stop and help the Jew who

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 18:22

had been beaten and robbed and left half dead by the side of the road. Think of it, clergymen probably hurrying to church, showing no compassion. And who did stop to assist the injured man in his great need. A Samaritan of all people, a man of whom it would have least been expected, for the Jews despised the Samaritans. Jesus was saying, Be Samaritans, all of you! Stop and help whoever is in need. Show compassion, inconvenience yourself, make the necessary sacrifices, treat every suffering person as a child of God. This is what being a neighbor means.

The religious attitude that expresses itself in prayer was also very important to Jesus. He prayed during His difficult temptation experience in the wilderness, in His struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in His terrible agony on the cross. He urged His followers to pray, giving specific instructions and setting forth the highest example of prayer in the Bible, the Lord's Prayer. He taught us to pray privately, sincerely, uneffectedly, and simply. He laid hold of the spiritual resources that come from prayer and recommended that we do the same. For Him religious living was not just ritual observance but rather the orientation of one's entire life toward God, and this involves a meaningful and mature devotional life.

It is very easy for theologically liberal Christians to be so absorbed in Jesus' emphasis on compassion and good will that we forget that He, like the prophets before Him, also

underlined the fact of judgement. Jesus said, "...I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment..."<sup>1</sup> As we suggested in Chapter 2, God's morally responsible love requires righteousness; therefore we cannot disregard the ethical requirements of the Christian life without experiencing the consequences. In times past it has sometimes been supposed that God judges wrongdoers by miraculously manipulating human events to punish them. However today, with our present scientific era's understanding of the cause and effect relationship of events, we know that God's justice works out in the natural course of affairs. Evil is by its nature self-destructive; therefore in the long run, if we engage in evil, we are caught up in the tragic consequences. We must not overlook the fact that Jesus emphasized the reality of God's judgement. And, as we have already said, He held a view that we no longer hold, that the Last Judgement was just around the corner.

Who was this Jesus of Nazareth? He was the Christ, that is, the long-awaited messiah, the Savior. There is scholarly debate about what Jesus actually thought of His own role. With the nature of the New Testament record that took shape in the early days of the Church, it is impossible to segregate out with certainty the exact words of Jesus from those that were attributed to Him by the first century Christians. Some

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 5:22

scholars believe that Jesus thought of Himself as the Messiah, and others think that this is a role that was projected back on Him by the early Church. I agree with those who conclude that Jesus Himself acknowledged His Messiahship.

It seems clear that Jesus believed that He played a unique role in the Jewish tradition and that He consciously took upon Himself the role of Messiahship. And yet, He re-interpreted this role. There were various conceptions of Messiahship in Jesus' time, and one prominent view was that God would send a strong king like King David who had reigned with political and military success a thousand years before. Such a ruler, it was hoped, could put an end to the unpopular Roman occupation and restore Israel to its proper destiny as a free people. Jesus, however, did not accept this role but rather reinterpreted Messiahship in deeply spiritual terms as He applied it to Himself. He was apparently guided by the suffering servant passages in the fifty third chapter of Isaiah that spoke of the redeeming power of suffering:

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.

These words of the prophet were familiar to Jesus, and He clearly applied them to Himself as He re-thought the Messianic role.

One day when Jesus was traveling with His disciples through Caesarea Philippi, He asked them who people said that

He was, and they replied that some thought He was John the Baptist, others said He was Elijah come back to life, and still others thought He was one of the other prophets. Then He asked who they thought He was, and Peter answered, "'You are the Christ.'"<sup>1</sup> If this passage is authentic, it makes very clear that Jesus considered Himself to be the Messiah.

It is only natural for us to ask why Jesus was the Messiah rather than someone else? After all, there have been so many good and saintly people through the centuries. The answer is that Jesus of Nazareth filled this very special role because He more completely than any other person of whom we have any knowledge opened His life to God with complete trust and faith; therefore He became the perfect vehicle for God's revelation. It is the totality of His commitment that made it possible for His life to mirror God's love and will so completely. As Bishop John A. T. Robinson has written,

It is in Jesus, and Jesus alone, that there is nothing of self to be seen, but solely the ultimate, unconditional love of God. It is as he emptied himself utterly of himself that he became the carrier of 'the name which is above every name', the revealer of the Father's glory...<sup>2</sup>

You and I know that God shines through every human life to some degree, depending upon the measure of each person's faith. But Jesus' faith was complete; therefore, if we see God dimly in one another, we behold Him clearly in Jesus the Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark 8:29

<sup>2</sup>John A. T. Robinson, Honest to God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 74.



And so we say that Jesus was not only a great human being, but He was divine in the sense that God was so dramatically revealed in Him. We behold God in the quality of Jesus' life and ministry, in the nature of His suffering, and in the glory of His Easter victory. In the depth of His agony and anguish on the cross, instead of uttering words of despair and bitterness, He rather spoke words that reflected God's reconciling love: "'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'"<sup>1</sup> That is not our human way of dealing with depravity and evil but God's way. It is the divine creative love that always ultimately triumphs, and it is most clear to us in Jesus Christ. Theologian Nels F. S. Ferré summed it up when he said, "Christ is the conclusive presence of God in human life."

We have been saying that Jesus of Nazareth was a man of exceptional spiritual power who taught the greatest truths of religion with authority and who was the Messiah.

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 23:34

## Chapter 5

## HOW DOES JESUS CHRIST SAVE US?

What do we mean when we say that God saves us through Jesus Christ? We have spoken of Jesus' life, teachings, and Messiahship. Let us turn now to His suffering on the cross and the nature and significance of His resurrection.

There have been many interpretations and theological explanations of the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. With the long Old Testament tradition of animal blood sacrifices offered to God, and since Jesus' crucifixion took place at Passover time, it is not surprising that His followers began at a very early date to think of Jesus Christ as the paschal lamb of the Passover. By the time the Gospel of John was written, the author of that Gospel was picturing John, the Baptist, pointing to the arrival of Jesus, saying, "'Behold, the Lamb of God!'"<sup>1</sup> And the Apostle Paul, in speaking of the crucifixion, said, "For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed."<sup>2</sup> It seemed natural to ponder the significance of His suffering in God's plan.

In the eleventh century there was an English theologian named Anselm who argued that Jesus' blood shed upon the cross was a required payment to God to release humankind from Original Sin and thereby open the way for our salvation. This

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<sup>1</sup>John 1:36

<sup>2</sup>1 Corinthians 5:7

theory is based upon a literal interpretation of the legend of Adam, suggesting that Adam's disobedience to God was the original sin, and all of us as Adam's descendents have inherited that state of estrangement from God. It argues that God's awesome sense of justice had to be satisfied before He would release humanity from this state of sinfulness, and this role was played by Jesus Christ, the God-Man. Jesus, according to this line of reasoning, died as a ransom to bail humankind out of its Original Sin, and by His blood God's legalistic sense of justice was satisfied, and we were all released for salvation. The perfect Man voluntarily died as a blood sacrifice, and so He came to be considered the paschal lamb. It is surprising the extent to which Anselm's explanation of the meaning of the cross and other similar theories have influenced theological thought through the centuries, and some theologically conservative churches speak often still today about being "washed in the blood of the Lamb" and sing the words of "The Old Rugged Cross."

The problem with Anselm's theory of the Atonement and other similar explanations of the cross is two fold. First, they erroneously treat the legend of Adam as literal history and suggest that we have all inherited that sin from birth. It may be correct to say that Adam's sin is characteristic of all of us, but we have not needed any help from Adam to qualify as sinners. We have readily fallen into disobedience on our own! And it is particularly unthinkable to suggest that a lit-

the baby at birth is already an inherited sinner estranged from God before he is old enough even to engage in a moral decision. We simply cannot accept this idea of inherited guilt.

The second objection to the ransom explanation of Jesus' suffering is that it portrays a God who is less than the God of the Gospel. God is not a stubborn, arbitrary, legalistic deity demanding a payment of righteous blood for our salvation. Rather God's nature is love, and His mercy and grace are unfailing and eternal. God does not withhold forgiveness until a price is paid; rather He reaches out toward all people always seeking to reconcile us to Him.

This is what Jesus' suffering means--it is a revelation of the length to which God's saving love will go for us. We can reject God's love, violate His will, and impose the cross of suffering upon Him, but His healing, forgiving, transforming love never abandons us. Although we in no sense deserve it, the same pure love we behold in Jesus Christ upon the cross everlastingly seeks to forgive us, rehabilitate us, and reconcile us to God.

The Apostle Paul said, "...God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself..."<sup>1</sup> If we are fully to understand this, we need to remember our human condition as it was outlined in chapter 3. We have misused our freedom and often

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<sup>1</sup>II Corinthians 5:19

said No rather than Yes to God, thereby breaking our sacred personal relationship with God. And so we are separated or alienated from God, and there is a broken quality about our lives. It is through our own willfulness that we isolate ourselves from God and from other members of the human family.

Salvation through Jesus Christ is deliverance from life's fragmentation and isolation. If our sin alienates us from God, God's saving love revealed in Christ seeks to reconcile us to Him, that is, to restore us to a creative relationship with Him from which new life flows. Sin separates; God's redeeming activity bridges the chasm of separation. To be "in sin" is to be out of fellowship with God; to be "in faith" is to be in fellowship with God. Therefore nothing is more important than our decision of faith, our conscious consenting to God's creativity within us as we say, "Thy will be done!" All of the greatest prayers express this commitment to God's will. Jesus told His followers to say it in the Lord's Prayer, and He prayed it in the Garden of Gethsemane. Saint Francis of Assisi put it this way: "Make me an instrument of Thy peace."

Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son<sup>1</sup> illustrates so much of what we have been saying. The father of that story, symbolizing God, never stopped loving his wayward son, even though the lad had rejected his father's love and will. How-

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 15:11-24

ever the young man had to "come to himself" and repent for his wrongdoing before he could experience fully his father's forgiving and reconciling love. It was not that his father ever withheld that love, but rather that the condition of the son's heart had not been right to experience and appreciate it. And so it is in our dealings with God. We have to "come home" and allow ourselves to be brought back into a healed relationship with God. It takes repentance and commitment to restore the Father-child relationship.

In the story of Christian salvation are the lost, the found, and the finder. We are the lost, Jesus Christ is the finder, and then we are the found! We lack the spiritual resources to extricate ourselves from our self-imposed exile from God as we have sought to go-it-alone in life. We desperately need the love of God, so clearly revealed in Christ's suffering on the cross, to liberate us from the sin and death of our separation and rebellion, to draw us back into a creative fellowship with Him that grants new life.

The New Testament speaks ecstatically of this new life through Christ. It says, "...if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."<sup>1</sup> It is a life of faith, a life with God as we know Him in Jesus Christ as the acknowledged Lord, a life in which we seek to fulfill the requirements of Christian love, a life

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<sup>1</sup>III Corinthians 5:17

that struggles for social justice, a life that even transcends death. The experience of salvation, of being reconciled to God through our consenting faith, is like being "born anew." Nothing is ever the same again!

Let us consider now the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is a gap between what contemporary New Testament studies say and the assumptions of many lay people about the nature of the resurrection. In an article in the Los Angeles Times entitled "Did Jesus Rise Bodily? Most Scholars Say No," John Dart points out that at the nine-school Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, with the largest theological faculty in the world, New Testament professor Edward Hobbs said that "he didn't know of one school there in which a significant part of the faculty would accept statements that Jesus rose physically from the dead..."<sup>1</sup> This may come as a surprise to some; however the modern realization that physical resurrection runs contrary to our understanding of the laws of nature has led to an intensive scholarly study of the New Testament resurrection narratives in the attempt to understand what actually happened.

It is hard to be certain about what happened, because no one actually witnessed the resurrection itself. Many experienced Christ's living presence afterward, but not a single person saw the resurrection and could give a first hand report

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<sup>1</sup>John Dart, "Did Jesus Rise Bodily? Most Scholars Say No," Los Angeles Times (September 5, 1977), Part 1, p. 1.

of what happened. All of the Easter experiences described in the New Testament tell of the personal encounters of Christ's followers with the risen Christ after the resurrection. And, to complicate matters further, there was no general agreement among the Christians of the New Testament period about the exact nature of Christ's rising from the dead. They were certain after the first Easter that Jesus Christ lived, but they did not agree on the details about how it had come about.

The New Testament is our only source of information about the first Easter, yet there are some irreconcilable differences in the various Easter narratives. If we ask, To whom did the risen Christ first appear? we discover that Matthew says to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, presumably Mary, the mother of Jesus; John says to Mary Magdalene only; Luke says to Peter. It is interesting that they did not agree on the factual details. And a careful reading of the Easter narratives in the four Gospels reveals various sequences in the stories. The order of events is not the same from one story to another. This simply reveals that the authors of the Gospels worked with short pieces of tradition or anecdotes, and since they did not know the order in which the events took place, they fitted the story together as best they could, thus accounting for the differences. While these matters seem like insignificant details, they do reveal to us that the Gospel writers did not have complete information.

The first mention of Christ's resurrection in the New



Testament is not in the Gospels but rather in the fifteenth chapter of the book of I Corinthians. The Apostle Paul, writing about 54 A.D., that is, about twenty four years after the event, said,

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.<sup>1</sup>

Paul is saying here that the disciples saw the risen Christ, then five hundred did all at one time, then James and all the apostles saw Him, and finally Paul saw Him. The implication is that Paul had seen Christ just as truly as the others had. When and where had Paul seen the risen Christ? On the Damascus Road in his famous conversion experience which was an inner spiritual experience. He did not see Christ physically but spiritually; therefore in likening his seeing of Christ to the experience of the others, Paul seems to be saying that he believed all the others had seen the risen Christ not in the flesh but in inner spiritual experiences. This testimony of the Apostle Paul is considerably earlier than any of the Gospel accounts and suggests that Christ's resurrection was a spiritual phenomenon rather than a physical reanimation of Jesus' body.

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<sup>1</sup>I Corinthians 15:3-8

Some years passed before the first of the Gospels, Mark, appeared in about 70 A.D., now about forty years after the Easter event. Here in Mark we have the first mention in the New Testament of the empty tomb and the women appearing there with their spices on Easter morning. But it is generally agreed among scholars that in its original form the Gospel of Mark did not include the last eleven verses of the book as it now appears in our New Testament, and the only mention of Christ appearing to them is in that later ending of the book, verses 9 to 19 of the sixteenth chapter. It is not until the appearance of Matthew and Luke, still fifteen or more years later, that we have the first mention of the appearances of the risen Christ in physical form, seeming to suggest that this was a later, growing tradition. Finally in the Gospel of John, which probably was written about 95 to 100 A.D., we have the most elaborate account of the empty tomb and of physical appearances of the risen Christ to His followers. The fact that the empty tomb and physical appearance narratives became longer and more elaborate as the years passed has caused many New Testament scholars to conclude that this particular interpretation of Christ's resurrection as a physical coming alive again of His body was a developing tradition in the early Church and probably not historically accurate.

We need to add that in the Gospels, along side those passages that set forth the later tradition of a physical interpretation of the resurrection, there are other sections

that carry forth Paul's earlier understanding of the resurrection appearances as a spiritual presence. Remember the story of the two disciples who hiked from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the first Easter and were suddenly joined by the risen Christ whose presence they vividly felt, and then He vanished. And the Gospel of John tells of the disciples assembling in a room in Jerusalem on Easter night, and the risen Christ came right through the door and made His presence felt among them.

We are saying that in the New Testament there are spelled out two views of Jesus' resurrection--(1) that it was a spiritual experiencing of His living spirit by those who had faith, and (2) that it was a physical reanimation of His body. There are Christians of intelligence and sincerity who hold each view; however the scholarly evidence is on the side of the spiritual interpretation of the resurrection. And there is no reason for us to be reluctant to accept this Pauline view, for we know that this kind of spiritual experiencing of the presence of a person not physically present happens every day. Many people at death or shortly thereafter appear very vividly in the thought of their loved ones. Sensitive people do experience very convincingly the spiritual presence of those dear to them even when they are not present in bodily form. Why then should we be surprised that two of Jesus' disciples walking to Emmaus should have sensed His living presence with them?

I have taken so much space to discuss Christ's resur-

rection because there is considerable interest in this theme among lay people. But the important matter is not which interpretation of the resurrection we accept but rather the fact that it did occur! Of that there can be no doubt. After the first Easter His followers were absolutely sure that Jesus Christ lived. At first they had felt that the cause was lost, and they were ready to return to their fishing and tax collecting, but then the risen, living Christ appeared to them, and their joy knew no bounds. Now they would set about turning that world upside down in the name of Christ. They knew that Jesus Christ had conquered death and that all He stood for lived. They realized that God's victorious love can transform the Good Fridays of life into Easter! Jesus Christ was their living Lord.

We return now to the question with which we began this chapter: How does God save us through Jesus Christ? God in the life and suffering of Jesus Christ has supremely revealed His redeeming love that alone can save us from our brokenness and alienation. When we respond to God's love in faith and commitment and consent to its creative working in our lives, we may fully experience the forgiveness and reconciliation that restores us to a dynamic personal relationship with God that fosters our renewal and growth. As we are restored to a fruitful, conscious fellowship with God, God is able to do almost unbelievable things with our lives--make us loving people, make us sensitive to human need, and endow us with a

concern for righteousness and a passion for justice. We have been "born again" into a new life, liberated to experience the joys and responsibilities of discipleship.

But Christian salvation is not limited to this life, for it transcends death. The heart of the Good News of the Christian faith is God's unfailing and eternal love. God's love reaches out to us everlastingly; therefore it would be unreasonable and illogical to assume that this love of God would somehow falter and abandon us on the occasion of our death. Since God by His very nature seeks always to foster the evolution of life's highest spiritual possibilities and to uphold the highest spiritual values, it would be unthinkable to conclude that God would suddenly cease functioning as God as we reach the end of our life on earth. God is ever the God of our salvation; therefore His blessing continues beyond this earthly pilgrimage to the life that awaits us beyond the grave.

The Apostle Paul wrote,

For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'<sup>1</sup>

He was speaking here of the end of the world. He believed that at death there would be a period of "sleep," and then, when the heavenly trumpet sounded, the faithful would be re-

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<sup>1</sup>I Corinthians 15:53-54

surrected. This is quite different from the prevailing modern Christian view that has been influenced by Greek thought--that immediately at death people move into the after life. Having outgrown the ancient New Testament world view about the imminent end of the world, it is more reasonable to think of eternal life being in immediate continuity with this life. Nevertheless Paul's words about our mortal nature putting on immortality continue to be an inspiration to us.

For a long time humankind believed in a three-level universe with a flat earth as the middle level, with heaven as the upper level, and with hell as the underworld that was the bottom level. In Biblical times and in early Christian theology they tended to think that heaven was beyond the sky and that God and the redeemed dead dwelt there. And they believed hell was the place of punishment for the wicked. The Old Testament word "Sheol" and the New Testament word "Gehenna" were used to describe it. As long as heaven could be thought of as a place of rewards beyond the sky and hell as a subterranean torture chamber with a flat earth in between, heaven and hell were considered geographical locations.

Heaven and hell, however, are not places but conditions or qualities of life. Let us speak first of heaven. It is life with God. It is that quality of life that acknowledges that God is Lord, that life's meaning is in fulfilling His holy will, that we cannot grasp the purpose of the human adventure apart from God. Heaven is the faithful discipleship that

says, "Your kingdom come beginning with me." We need the dynamic personal relationship with God that comes with faith and an active devotional life so that we may be totally responsive to God's love and be channels of His redemptive creativity in the world.

If heaven is life with God, hell is the opposite, it is existence without God. Hell is the rejection of God, the denial of His lordship over us, it is life turned inward in selfishness, it is loneliness and isolation. How shallow, tragic, and meaningless this kind of existence is. Now, of course, God is always present and therefore inescapable; therefore life without God is theoretically impossible. God keeps working in our lives even when we deny Him. Our hearts keep beating, and the bodily processes keep functioning; and even in the life of the doctrinaire atheist God can foster love, good will, and righteousness. But, having said all of this, who can deny that our deliberate, willful rejection of God makes it infinitely more difficult for God to work redemptively in our lives? To the extent that we have consciously denied God's will and resisted His love at work in us, we have chosen hell, by which we mean godlessness.

There was a little boy who had been shopping with his mother and became lost. He went up to a policeman and said, "Sir, have you seen a lady go by without me?" There is no suffering so great as comes with the realization that one is lost. In Christian thought hell is being lost, being separ-

ated from God, denying and rejecting Him and teaching ourselves the idiotic lie that we can survive without Him. In this lostness life's meaning evaporates, life's purpose is forgotten, and our existence is self-centered. It is a living death.

Heaven is life with God, hell is life without God. But these are qualities of human experience not reserved for this life alone. It is our faith that these same dimensions of life exist beyond the grave. As we have said earlier in this chapter, the love of God transcends death. It eternally blesses people of consenting faith, fostering as always the highest possibilities and conserving the spiritual values that are inherent in Christian personality. If God allowed everything to come to naught at death, He would be the great waster of values. Rather God is the great upholder of life's values! Therefore, knowing the Good News of God's grace and saving love, we realize that heaven is not simply a quality of life that we may experience on earth but likewise the nature of eternal life for the person who seeks to be in fellowship with God. We do not know the details, but it is enough to know that we shall dwell with the God of unfailing love.

But what about hell? It has usually been our assumption that the individual who consistently denies God and rejects His holy will experiences that same tragic isolation and alienation beyond the grave. And yet we have to confess that this view does not do justice to God's love, grace, and for-



givenness which know no bounds. Perhaps God does hold out a continuing opportunity for spiritual fulfillment to those who did not respond to His love during their earthly lives. This we cannot know, but recognizing the eternal nature of God's love, it is consistent to think so. As the Apostle Paul said, nothing, even death, "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Romans 8:39

## Chapter 6

## ARE PRAYERS ANSWERED?

Are our prayers answered? We cannot answer that question without a careful study of the nature and role of prayer.

There is a great deal of skepticism about prayer. Some people say that prayer is simply a matter of autosuggestion, of talking to oneself with some wishful thinking. Others argue that prayer is based on superstition--you ask God to perform a miracle, and if something surprising happens, you interpret that as the intervention of God. There are many confused and confusing thoughts about prayer being circulated today; therefore it is very important that we have a clear understanding of the nature of prayer, how to pray, and the results of prayer.

Let us begin by asking, What is prayer? Prayer is our bringing to consciousness the fact of God and our deliberate attempt to relate ourselves creatively to God. Archbishop William Temple once said, "When men worship God, He reigns. When men do not worship God, He reigns." That is, God exists and reigns whether we pray or not. He is not dependent on our worship. Furthermore God is omnipresent, whether or not we acknowledge His presence. But in prayer we consciously encounter God and seek to align our lives with His will and purpose.

The story is told of an eleven year old boy who wrote

an autobiographical theme for school in the light of a child's biography he had just read about Leonardo da Vinci. The sixth grader wrote, "Leonardo da Vinci was a man like me. He had all kinds of ideas. They didn't always work. He started lots of things he didn't finish... Some of his inventions are used today, like tanks. He was also good at art, and many other things. I am too." There was a self-confident lad who apparently thought that he and Leonardo da Vinci could do it all by themselves. It is a great thing to have a good self image, but prayer is based upon the realization that the creativity in life is from God. God is the active Creator who has not only created the universe and given it pattern, balance, and meaning, but also is still the creative thrust that sustains and orders nature and fosters the evolution of spiritual values in human life. In prayer, then, we do not set out on a blind search for a God whom we hope to persuade to assist us in carrying out our enterprises. Rather we encounter the God who is already redemptively at work, and we seek to align our lives with His saving activity. The purpose of prayer is not to change God's role but rather our role in the divine-human relationship.

How shall we pray? The first thing to do is to get ourselves physically and spiritually situated for prayer. For different people this means different things. Some people prefer to kneel for prayer, believing that posture expresses the proper humility for their personal devotions. Others pray

best if they are fully relaxed, and so they need to overcome their tensions and get into a comfortable position. They may sit down or lie down and consciously relax their muscles from head to toe so that no discomfort will distract their meditations. Still others choose to pray now and then throughout the day--while taking a shower, driving a car, doing housework, riding in an elevator, seated at a desk, or walking in the woods. Perhaps we should analyze ourselves and determine how best to prepare ourselves both physically and spiritually for prayer and then deliberately make those necessary preparations so that our devotional experience may be authentic and uninterrupted with distractions.

Next we do well to remember who God is. God is sovereign love, the redeeming love that rules the creation and us. He is like a loving parent, like a good shepherd. He really cares about us, and yet He holds us morally accountable. If we are sincerely sorry for our waywardness, He always draws us back into a spiritually fulfilling relationship with Him and a creative loving relationship with our neighbors. One way to call all of this to mind is to review some familiar Biblical passages such as: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."<sup>1</sup> "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."<sup>2</sup> "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."<sup>3</sup> "For God so loved the world

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<sup>1</sup>Psalms 23:1

<sup>2</sup>Psalms 46:1

<sup>3</sup>Matthew 11:28

that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."<sup>1</sup>

As we begin our communication with God in prayer, we should not allow ourselves to become too preoccupied with the words we use, the mechanics of our prayers, the style of our utterance. Jesus said, "...in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words."<sup>2</sup> Long prayers are not necessarily better than short prayers. Wordiness is not an asset. Instead of talking so much in our devotions, we need to listen more. Pamela Gray said, "For one soul that exclaims, 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth,' there are ten that say, 'Hear, Lord! for thy servant speaketh.'" Our chattering can stifle our devotional experience; therefore at least sometimes we should do well to do as Brother Lawrence did long ago, simply practice the presence of God by listening.

It is also important that we pray consistently. Dr. John R. Mott long ago said, "...prayer is something the reality and power of which can be verified only by praying." We need to practice praying if we are to mature in our prayer life. A person can read a book about how to play horseshoes, and in so doing he will learn the rules of the game and how to hold a horseshoe. But he will never learn to throw ringers unless he actually practices throwing the horseshoes. The

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<sup>1</sup>John 3:16

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 6:7

learning of a skill takes practice, and that is surely true of prayer. The more we pray, the more meaningful our prayer life becomes. And we should recognize that sometimes we have dry runs in our attempts at prayer. It may be that we are distracted with other things and therefore unable to make meaningful contact with God. Perhaps we should then relax and try again later in the day when conditions are more conducive to an authentic devotional experience.

What should we pray about? A French priest named Michel Quoist has written some very contemporary prayers that are so beautifully spontaneous. Listen to his prayer about a friend:

I shook hands with my friend, Lord,  
And suddenly, when I saw his sad and anxious face, I feared  
that you were not in his heart.  
I am troubled, as I am troubled before a closed tabernacle  
when there is no light to show that you are there.<sup>1</sup>

And here is one about sin:

I have fallen, Lord,  
Once more.  
I can't go on, I'll never succeed.  
I am ashamed, I don't dare look at you.  
And yet I struggled, Lord, for I knew you were right near  
me, bending over me, watching.  
But temptation blew like a hurricane,  
But instead of looking at you I turned my head away.  
I stepped aside  
While you stood, silent and sorrowful,  
Like the spurned fiancé who sees his loved one carried  
away by the enemy.  
When the wind died down as suddenly as it had arisen,  
When the lightning ceased after proudly streaking the darkness,  
All of a sudden I found myself alone, ashamed, disgusted,

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<sup>1</sup>Michel Quoist, Prayers (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 22.

with my sin in my hands.<sup>1</sup>

And this one about gratitude:

Thank you, Lord, thank you.  
 Thank you for all the gifts that you have given me today,  
 Thank you for all I have seen, heard, received...  
 Thank you for being there, Lord.  
 Thank you for listening to me, for taking me seriously...  
 Thank you Lord,  
 Thank you.<sup>2</sup>

Prayers like these reveal that our lives write the agenda for our prayers. We need to pray about whatever is on our minds--our failures, our frustrations, our needs, our hopes, and our high resolves. We may feel that we have made a mess of our lives, and it has caught up with us. Or we are heart-broken over the disappointing behavior of our children. Or we are standing, grief-stricken, at the bedside of a loved one about to die. Or the doctor has informed us about our own failing health, and we are afraid. Or we despair at the widespread breakdown in morality, the social injustices in our society, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world. All of these concerns are appropriate subject matter for our prayers.

It is sometimes said that there are six important general themes in prayer. First, adoration, the praise of God: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord... Serve the Lord with gladness!"<sup>3</sup> Second, thanksgiving, our gratitude to God: We thank

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 61, 63.

<sup>3</sup>Psalms 100:1-2

You, O God, for Your infinite goodness to us and to all human-kind. Third, confession, our recognition of our sins and prayer for God's forgiveness: Forgive us, O Lord, that we have rejected Your love and lived in selfishness. Fourth, commitment, our dedication of our lives to God: We surrender our lives to You in sincere consecration, O Lord. Fifth, petition, our request of God: Grant that we may live in the spirit of Christ, that we may be a blessing to the world in which we live. Sixth, intercession, our prayer for others: Give health to those who are sick, food to those who are hungry, justice to those who languish in tyranny, and peace to those who suffer in war. We may choose any of these six themes or all of them as the subjects of our meditations and prayers.

Now we return to the question with which we began: Are our prayers answered? The answer to that question is Yes, but not necessarily the ways we had anticipated.

Adoniram Judson, the great missionary to Burma, at the end of his life said, "I never prayed sincerely and earnestly for anything, but it came; at some time--no matter at how distant a day--somehow, in some shape--probably the last I should have devised--it came." Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, commenting on Judson's remark, wrote, "But Judson had prayed for entrance into India and had been compelled to go to Burmah; he had prayed for his wife's life, and had buried both her and his two children; he had prayed for release from the King of Ava's prison and had lain there months, chained and



miserable. Scores of Judson's petitions had gone without an affirmative answer. But Judson always had been answered. He had been upheld, guided, reenforced; unforeseen doors had opened through the very trials he sought to avoid; and the deep desires of his life were being accomplished not in his way but beyond his way."<sup>1</sup>

Prayer is not a matter of calling upon God to perform miracles but rather a way of relating our lives to God so that His love and purpose may find fuller expression through us. It makes us deeply aware of God's saving action that is always attempting to fulfill our lives. It alerts us to acknowledge our own spiritual frailties. It nurtures a growing faith and challenges us to commit our lives to God in Christ. It sensitizes us to the needs of others, and it inspires us to seek the kingdom of God. In short, prayer does not change God, but us! Its purpose is to bring our lives into alignment with God's will. Prayer restores wholeness to life and inspires us to live with courage and hope.

Dr. William R. Parker and Elaine St. Johns in their book, Prayer Can Change Your Life, suggest that a person at prayer should ask himself or herself, "Am I living the problem rather than the answer?"<sup>2</sup> We are hypocritical if we ask to be

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<sup>1</sup>Harry Emerson Fosdick, "The Meaning of Prayer," in his The Three Meanings--Prayer, Faith, Service (New York: Association Press, 1950), pp. 124-125.

<sup>2</sup>William R. Parker and Elaine St. Johns, Prayer Can Change Your Life (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1957), p. 208.

forgiven but keep on sinning, if we pray for our church but cancel our church pledge, if we pray for peace but keep on waging war. Clearly the way is most fully open to God to answer our prayers if we co-operate and deliberately set out to live the answer to the prayers we have prayed.

Alfred Lord Tennyson said, 'More things are wrought by prayer Than this world dreams of.'<sup>1</sup> That is true. An enlightened understanding of prayer enables us to understand how personally to relate our lives to God for the most significant spiritual results. Our prayers are answered in God's way, not ours.

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<sup>1</sup>Alfred Tennyson, "Prayer" from "Idylls of the King," in The World's Great Religious Poetry (New York: Macmillan, 1943), p. 414.

## Chapter 7

## WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD?

There is a great deal of questioning today about the Christian missionary enterprise; therefore let us discuss the role of Christian missions in our pluralistic world.

I am deeply indebted to Elton Trueblood in his book, The Validity of the Christian Mission<sup>1</sup> for the helpful way he has addressed himself to the key questions that are on people's minds about overseas missions. Many of his ideas are reflected in what I write here, for I thoroughly agree with his viewpoint.

Many people question our right to go abroad to teach Christianity because our record here at home has not been very good. What moral right do we have to export our religion when we have often done poorly ourselves? Dr. Trueblood states the argument:

Once we have all streams unpolluted, all races equal in opportunity, all education elevated to the highest possible level, all wars eliminated, all people with adequate financial support for a decent life, then, and only then, the argument proceeds, can we honorably seek to influence people of other lands.<sup>2</sup>

This is ridiculous. Of course, we as Christians are vulnerable in the sense that we never achieve the standard of perfection that we profess, and we must keep striving for it. But, if

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<sup>1</sup>Elton Trueblood, The Validity of the Christian Mission (New York: Harper & Row, 1972)

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 30-31.

we had to postpone helping others and teaching them our faith until we were perfect, we should have to wait forever.

Another question often raised is, Why should we carry Christianity to the people of distant lands who have their own religion? It is often argued that we should let every society do its own thing, live and let live. Why should we disturb the traditions, cultures, and religious rites of other peoples? While we admit that some Christian missionaries of the past have insensitively imposed Western culture upon those to whom they taught the Christian faith, enlightened Christian leaders throughout the world today strive not to impose our culture on others but rather to nurture native churches indigenous to their cultures. The Christian missionaries of the theologically liberal churches realize how important it is to encourage a native expression of the Christian faith in every part of the world with Christian nationals in the key leadership roles.

But we can be overly sentimental about the sacredness of native customs. We cannot say that all cultural and religious traditions are good and therefore should be left completely in tact. As Dr. Trueblood says,

Whether those living in warm climates should wear clothing or not may be treated as a minor question, but whether women shall be forced to do the backbreaking work while the men do no physical labor is a question of a wholly different character. To see a man place a heavy load upon his wife's back while he walks on, totally unencumbered, is likely to help an impartial observer to overcome latent sentimentality about the sacredness of of local customs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

There has to be some liberation in our society and in all societies if the good life is to be possible, and Christianity has emancipated many people throughout the world from destructive superstitions and exploitive customs that have imposed fears and injustices. It is right to encourage the most indigenous possible development of Christianity wherever it is planted in the world, but that does not mean that we should tolerate anywhere in the world evils that destroy human values.

We readily acknowledge that there is spiritual and ethical truth in the other great religions, but we affirm the uniqueness of the Christian revelation in Jesus Christ in whom we see the crowning disclosure of God's nature and will. The real validity of the Christian mission is in our certainty that the Good News of Jesus Christ is true. Dr. Trueblood says, "the best reason for the dedication to the spread of the faith of Christ is the conviction that this faith conforms to reality as does no other alternative of which we are aware."<sup>1</sup> Therefore we need to help people rethink their religious traditions in the light of this Christ revelation.

Either the teachings of Christianity are true or they are not. If they are true, they are not only true for us who call ourselves Christians but also for all humankind, for truth is universal. And, if they are false, they are false not only for the distant mission field but also for us in every local

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

parish church, and we had better close up shop. This simply means that if the world mission is wrong, so is the home mission, and we are through. The Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord is true, and truth is universally applicable. There is nothing cultural or relative about it. This is not to deny the cultural factors and traditions in every faith, but the body of truth that is the Gospel is everlastingly true and relates to all peoples and heritages; therefore we are in business as mission here and everywhere. It is because we are so enthusiastic about this precious truth of our faith that we realize it would be intensely selfish to keep it just for ourselves. Rather we gladly share it, responding to Jesus' great commission: "'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...'"<sup>1</sup>

But the Christian missionary task is not confined to the proclamation of the Christian faith. We seek also to minister to the total well-being of all people. This means food, education, medical care, family planning, agricultural assistance, and technical aid. These are important aspects of the Christian mission as carried on by the theologically liberal churches today. Many people still think of a missionary as a preacher in a black suit teaching the Bible to a group of cannibals seated under a palm tree in some distant jungle. More likely the missionary will be a school teacher, an administra-

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 28:19

tor of emergency aid, a social worker, an agricultural or technical consultant, a doctor, or a nurse, and an important part of their responsibility is to provide motivation and knowledge to help people help themselves to more abundant lives. What an inspiration it is to realize how, under the influence of these missionaries with their varied professional skills, lives have been transformed, bodies have been healed, living conditions upgraded, and redemptive forces set in motion by which the possibility of the good life has been greatly enhanced for countless people. Some people have not realized that immunization programs against disease, well-drilling in drought areas, and specialized agricultural training to upgrade food production are a part of our Christian overseas ministries. So are literacy programs, rural medical clinics, and family planning centers.

We are saying that the scope of our Christian mission is global, and there are two dimensions to our missionary task --to proclaim the Good News of the Christian faith and to minister to the total well-being of all people in the name of Christ. Realizing the importance of our Christian world mission we recognize that so many Christians who have been "missing in action" should become "active in mission."

There are so many great missionary concerns, but let us single out the problem of world hunger for further discussion. The challenge of feeding the world is a striking example of a problem that requires Christians to respond with

compassion, knowledge, ingenuity, and all of the resources at our disposal. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "To allow the hungry man to remain hungry would be blasphemy against God and one's neighbor, for what is nearest to God is precisely the need of one's neighbor."

Dean Freudenberger and Paul M. Minus, Jr. in their book, Christian Responsibility in a Hungry World, point to the urgency of the problem when they say, "Never before have so many suffered so much from hunger... Over one-half of the human race exists in conditions of chronic poverty that keep them underfed and uncertain about their next meal."<sup>1</sup> They go on to quote nutritionist Alan Berg who describes hunger's human toll:

"The light of curiosity absent from children's eyes. Twelve-year-olds with the physical stature of eight-year-olds. Youngsters who lack the energy to brush aside flies collecting about the sores on their faces. Agonizingly slow reflexes of adults crossing traffic. Thirty-year-old mothers who look sixty."<sup>2</sup>

For many of the starving people of the world the only escape from hunger is death.

Professor Roger Shinn of the Union Theological Seminary has said that in his judgement humankind is pushing at the limits of the capacity of the planet earth. Following World War II there was a fantastic period of the expansion

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<sup>1</sup>C. Dean Freudenberger and Paul M. Minus, Jr., Christian Responsibility in a Hungry World (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 13.



of the world economy, and we thought that would be the pattern of the future. We took for granted that technology could save us, but now we are again learning that scarcity is normal for the human race.<sup>1</sup>

Not even the experts are sure of the answers, but it does not take any genius to know that part of the problem is the overconsumption of us Americans. I say this with reluctance, because I, as much as you, enjoy our high standard of living in the United States. But consider the fact that we are only 6% of the world's population but consume 40% of the world's goods. In a world of scarcity, that is one good reason why there is not enough to go around. For example, the per capita consumption of grains in the developing nations is 500 lb. per year, but we Americans consume on the average a ton. The reason for this is that while the people of the poor nations eat most of their grain, we feed most of ours to cattle that utilize less than 7% of the nutritive value of the cereals. It is more enjoyable to get our protein through eating so much meat, but it is an extravagant procedure in a world where food is in short supply. Other extravagances are our feeding of so much protein to our pets, our generous use of fertilizers in our gardens that could be used for food production in food deficit areas of the world, and our reckless waste of food.

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<sup>1</sup>Lecture at the School of Theology at Claremont, November 1974.

Another important factor in the world hunger problem is the world's growing population. Back in 1798 an English economist who was also an Anglican clergyman, a man by the name of Thomas Malthus, published his famous "Essay on the Principle of Population" in which he held that the population of the world increases geometrically while the resources of the earth to support that population increase only arithmetically. Nobody was very worried about the Malthusian Theory until recently, because the problem seemed so far away, and wars, famines, and disease tended to check that population growth. But now we are experiencing the very situation that Malthus predicted--the growth of population is exceeding the capacity of the resources of the earth to support it. There were 2 billion people in the world in 1930, 3 billion in 1960, there are 4 billion now, and, at the present rate of growth, there will be 8 billion forty years from now. The world's over-all population growth rate, the annual excess of births over deaths, is at the rate of 1.8%.

What is our missionary task in grappling with this staggering problem of hunger? We can and are doing many things, and we need to redouble our efforts because of the urgency of the situation. We are providing emergency assistance through denominational mission boards and church agencies such as Church World Service and the Christian Rural Overseas Program. Foods, seed grain, fertilizers, live stock, well-drilling and agricultural training programs are provided in areas of great

need to help up-grade the level of food production. It has been said, "Give a boy a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a boy to fish and you feed him for life." While we have the responsibility to provide crisis aid, surely the more significant long-term help is in helping the people of food deficit areas to become producers themselves of an adequate food supply.

E. F. Schumacher, an English economist, in his book, Small Is Beautiful,<sup>1</sup> argues with our usual conclusion that everything has to be big to be successful. He thinks that instead of imposing our large scale technology that requires so much capital on developing nations, we should rather assist them with what he calls an "intermediate technology." Instead of tractors, perhaps well designed hand plows should be made available. The labor supply is vast, and there is a lack of capital. Instead of huge factories that put all of the traditional hand laborers out of work, perhaps a method of up-grading the efficiency of the small shop would better fit the conditions of many developing areas of the world. It would take less capital, increase the productivity and efficiency of the present labor force, save energy, and avoid large scale unemployment. Small can be beautiful, Schumacher argues. Surely this principle applies as we try to help them increase their food production by methods that fit their native setting.

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<sup>1</sup>E. F. Schumacher, Small Is Beautiful (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

Still another important attack on the problem of hunger is to redouble our efforts at controlling the rate of the world's population growth. Church sponsored birth control clinics are playing an important role along with governmental family planning programs. There is also evidence that as people's nutritional and basic material needs are met, they tend to have fewer children; therefore helping people feed themselves indirectly helps to bring the population explosion under control.

Directly related to special missionary strategies to feed the hungry people of other lands is the necessity for us Americans to change our life style. We have already referred to our overconsumption in the United States. E. F. Schumacher, in emphasizing that the high standard of living of the United States and the entire Western world threatens to use up the resources of the earth so that there will never be any hope of the developing nations to enjoy their share of this planet's goods, has bluntly said, "The world cannot afford the USA. Nor can it afford western Europe or Japan. In fact we might come to the conclusion that the earth cannot afford the 'modern world'"<sup>1</sup> There are some things that conscientious Christians can do to conserve so that there will be more for others: go without meat a day or two a week, join car pools to save gasoline, grow vegetables in one's own garden, serve smaller por-

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<sup>1</sup>Freudenberger and Minus, p. 90.

tions of food and encourage restaurants to do the same, walk and bicycle when possible, maintain home temperatures that will save fuel, and generally simplify our life styles. Furthermore we should try to influence American companies who have agricultural interests in food deficient countries to change their non-food crops to food crops, enabling those people to feed themselves. Of course, it may reduce our supply of coffee and rubber, but surely we would rather sacrifice some of our luxuries than to see others go hungry. Still another problem is to reduce our gigantic military budget. The nations of the world are spending \$275 billion annually for armaments. No wonder there is military violence, and no wonder there is inadequate agricultural research and development. It is a matter of guns or bread; the world cannot afford both.

Of the many missionary concerns in the world we have singled out the problem of hunger to illustrate the necessity of Christians to deal responsibly with the big issues before humankind. Besides the teaching of our faith we are concerned about every problem that stands in the way of people realizing the best possible life. There are many other areas in which a missionary strategy is important--education, health care, the reordering of the world's economies to achieve greater justice, etc. Our concern is for the total well-being of all of God's children.

Robert J. McCracken tells of one of the first purchasers of a piece of land in England on which there now stands

a large Ford plant, a member of Parliament by the name of John Ward. He bought the site when it was flooded and therefore cheap and then had it drained at public expense. After his death this amazing prayer was found among his papers:

O Lord, Thou knowest I have mine estates in the City of London, and likewise that I have recently purchased an estate in fee simple in the County of Essex. I beseech Thee to preserve the two counties of Middlesex and Essex from fire and earthquake, and as I have a mortgage in Hertfordshire, I beg of Thee likewise to have an eye of compassion on that county; for the rest of the counties, Thou mayest deal with them as Thou art pleased.<sup>1</sup>

Here was a man who considered himself a Christian but who was so intensely selfish that he had no capacity to look out toward others in good will and love. It is clear that he was considerably less than Christian, for discipleship involves the missionary outreach toward others by which we seek to give specific implementation to our love. Dr. Trueblood wrote, "A missionary is anyone who serves as a consequence of being profoundly touched by the love of Christ."<sup>2</sup> It is because we are so moved and inspired by the love of Christ that we have no choice but to go forth and serve. And so, if we are serious about the Christian faith, we are by necessity missionaries. And our churches are mission stations, for mission is at the heart of the Church's life.

In this pluralistic world, with all of its many cul-

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<sup>1</sup>Robert J. McCracken, Questions People Ask (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. 72.

<sup>2</sup>Trueblood, p. x.

tures, faiths, and value systems, it is our task to be authentically Christian, and that means to teach our faith enthusiastically and to minister to the total well-being of people everywhere in the name of Christ. The field of the Christian mission is the entire world.

## Chapter 8

## WHY DO WE ENGAGE IN CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ACTION?

Why do we engage in Christian social action? It is often said that we church people should "stick to religion" by which is usually meant personal Bible study, prayer, and the pursuit of the individual life of faith. Some go so far as to suggest that the Church's involvement in public issues is a violation of the American principle of the separation of church and state. Others argue that churches cannot afford to be "politically active" or they will lose their members.

Julian J. Keiser has pointed out very clearly that Biblical religion is deeply concerned about society:

Religion concerns itself with man's relationship to God and what that relationship requires of him in relation to his fellow man. Was it proper for Moses, at the call of God, to lead the children of Israel out of the political bondage and slavery of Egypt into the freedom appropriate to the sons of God? That historic civil rights demonstration occurred over three thousand years ago and is the most important event in the Scriptures of our Jewish brethren, and highly important to Christian tradition as well. Also fundamental in our Judeo-Christian scriptures and faith are the fearless utterances of the prophet Amos who inveighed against unethical business practices in the market places of his day, and those of Nathan, the prophet, who condemned King David for using government power for his own ends, and of Isaiah in advising the governmental leaders of his day on international relations and peace among the nations. They involved themselves directly in public controversy and political issues.<sup>1</sup>

And Jesus engaged in aggressive social action as He drove the

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<sup>1</sup>Address at Pasadena Kiwanis Club, October 22, 1964.



money changers out of the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> The Bible is never reluctant about grappling with social injustice or public faithlessness.

Long ago in the eighth century before Christ a shepherd of Tekoa by the name of Amos left the southern kingdom of Judah and traveled north to Bethel and there in the northern kingdom of Israel he uttered an outspoken and critical message. He quoted God as saying to Israel, "'Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel...'"<sup>2</sup> A plumbline is a string with a weight on the end of it used to determine when a structure is in alignment. Today a carpenter usually uses a tool called a level which has a little bubble that lines up to show that something is straight, but in the ancient world a plumbline was the available tool for the workman to measure how straight or true his work was. For God to set a plumbline in the midst of His people was simply to suggest that He was measuring them to discover how they lined up. God everlastingly does this to all societies, and He expects obedience to His will.

Mark Twain once remarked that what worried him about the Bible was not the bits he did not understand but the bits he did understand. He was suggesting that the Bible is very spiritually and morally demanding, and he was right. We have no right to disregard the Bible's prophetic stance and to di-

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 21:12-13

<sup>2</sup>Amos 7:8

lute its message into a bland, easy-going testimony that treads lightly on the social issues. The Bible takes a strong stand for social righteousness and is outspokenly critical of those who disregard it.

To suggest that when Christians and churches speak out on public issues they are violating the historic American principle of the separation of church and state is ridiculous! Our free political heritage owes a great deal to the religious leaders and churches of colonial America. They rallied the people to the cause of independence, and from their pulpits and in their town meetings they hammered out the principles of constitutional democracy. Later, before and during the Civil War, the ministers and churches played a significant role in the movement to abolish slavery. In recent years it was Christian activists whose tireless efforts on behalf of civil rights tipped the balance and led to the enactment of the important Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The churches are often warned that, if they become involved in controversial issues, they will lose members and financial support. There is no doubt about the fact that some people prefer a "safe" religion that sidesteps issues and keeps everything on an even keel. But there are others who simply cannot tolerate such a watered-down version of the Gospel. An interesting survey was made of recent church drop-outs in the United Methodist Church to determine if that denomination's liberal stance on race relations had had any bearing on their

leaving the church. The finding was that 23% thought their church was moving too fast, and 23% felt it was moving too slowly! In most churches there are those who argue with the pace of their church's social action programs, and often as many say Faster as Slower. Christians cannot be guided by opinion polls anyway, for it is not our task to preach and do what is popular but rather to be true to the demands of the Christian faith.

Nevertheless many of us temperamentally will go out of our way to avoid unpleasantness, to side-step a show-down on a controversial subject. We want to be serene, not anxious; happy, not sad; therefore we tend to gloss over difficult social problems and settle for an easy false peace that is unrealistic. The Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah was furious with the false priests and prophets of his time who reassured the people saying there was nothing to worry about when actually their world was falling apart. Jeremiah said, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace."<sup>1</sup> We of the Church must not be guilty of this today--tranquilizing people with reassurances that all is well when in fact our world is torn apart by evil, violence, and tyranny.

The question before us is how shall we proclaim the social application of the Christian faith? We have to confess

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremiah 6:14

the fallibility of the Church and all of its spokesmen. There is no justification for the preacher standing in his or her pulpit and simply stating his or her opinions on current affairs. And often there are important psychological factors involved in the Church's handling of public issues. A minister may have problems of his own that are expressed in a great deal of hostility in his preaching and his aggressive, demanding style. Usually such anger does not increase his effectiveness. And there are some people in every congregation who for some reason have the conviction that the preacher should scold them, should punish them. Perhaps they have had severe parents and now project that role of an angry authority figure on their clergyman and feel more secure if he condemns and scolds. Furthermore Social Action Committees in churches may become instruments by which angry activists may unfairly wish to impose their point of view on entire congregations. Obviously these factors may stand in the way of an enlightened, effective Christian strategy for social action.

One of the great themes of the Protestant Reformation was the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the sole head of the Church. This means that no minister, priest, bishop, deacon, or anyone else is an infallible teacher of Christian truth. Some people may have a fuller grasp of Christian truth than others because of their careful study, their persistent prayer, and the maturity of their spiritual experience, but no person has a complete mastery of ethical and spiritual truth.

Only God Himself as we know Him in the spirit of the living Christ is the infallible Source of truth. And so we must continually look to Him and the inspired Biblical record of His revelation of truth for guidance in dealing with the complex social issues of our time. The role of the Christian preacher and teacher is to give an exposition of the Biblical faith, seeking to apply its truths to the contemporary situation. If anything we say is to carry any weight, it must be an elaboration and interpretation of God's truth as we discover it in the Bible. Of course, the circumstances of life in the twentieth century are very different from those of the Biblical period; nevertheless the fundamental truths about faith, human relationships, and the meaning of history are everlastingly the same. Therefore Biblical truth still applies, but it is appropriate for us to engage in responsible dialogue about how to give it accurate application to the current scene.

I believe that we are speaking in the spirit of the Biblical message as we say that there are three questions that may help us determine God's will and purpose in specific social situations. To determine what is right and wrong we need only to ask these simply questions about any proposed course of action.

First, does it acknowledge the intrinsic value of persons? The Bible says that people count, that every person is a child of God; therefore we cannot tolerate anything that exploits persons. If any activity respects the importance of

persons, it is right; if it is destructive of human values, it is wrong.

Second, does it build up rather than tear down human community? Cain asked God, "'...am I my brother's keeper?'"<sup>1</sup> The Bible's answer to that question is an emphatic Yes. We have a responsibility for the well-being of one another. Jesus insisted that we are to love not only our neighbors but our enemies as well. If we build up human relationships, we are doing what is right; if we tear them down, we are engaging in wrong doing.

Third, does it involve the stewardship of the resources of the earth? This theme is not as emphatic in the Bible because the earth was so sparsely populated in Biblical times that it probably never occurred to them that the resources of God's earth could be exhausted. But this idea is nevertheless implied in all of the Biblical teaching about the stewardship of our lives, money, talents, and harvest and in the eschatological emphasis upon the ultimate consummation of God's high purpose. It is only as we preserve the earth as an adequate environment for future generations that God's purpose can find future fulfillment.

These three questions provide us with a fairly accurate rule of thumb to determine God's will in any social situa-

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 4:9

tion: Does it build up or tear down (1) persons, (2) communities, and (3) the good earth?

Take the liberation movements--black liberation and women's liberation. When they free persons for full personhood, they are right and good. When they foster mature human relationships in families and in society, they are good. When they reflect only hostility, when they do violence to loving relationships, or when the newly-liberated try to enslave others, those aspects of these movements are destructive.

Or consider the wide spread violence in our society. We are quick to identify the violence that inflicts physical injury, but we often overlook the more subtle kinds of violence in our cultural patterns and economic system by which people are dehumanized and exploited. Dr. Robert McAfee Brown points out that violence is committed not only by roughnecks and law-breakers but also by respected law-abiding citizens of the community. Violence, he says, is not limited to overt physical acts of destruction in which "someone is roughed up, pushed around, hit, stabbed, shot, raped, or in some other way made the object of physical abuse." It is also the violation of another person "in the sense of infringing upon or disregarding or abusing or denying that other, whether physical harm is involved or not."<sup>1</sup> To depersonalize a person in any way is in the broad sense an act of violence that renders human hurt;

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<sup>1</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, Religion and Violence (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 6-7.

therefore it is wrong. And to deny a group or race anything that is rightly theirs is to do them violence and tear down human community, and therefore to do evil.

What about the world's rapidly escalating military budgets that now total \$275 billion. Even if it could be argued that small national defensive forces to defend each nation's own territory could be morally justified, the colossal, world-wide expenditures for weaponry by every standard of Biblical measurement are sinful. They foster the resolution of international conflicts by military might that disregards the value of persons and that destroys societies and nations. They stimulate economic inflation with its great toll in human suffering. And they squander the world's limited resources that should be used to provide the necessities of the good life for all of God's people with enough left over for future generations.

Dr. Davie Napier has said, "I am appalled that we can, in the name of God, continue to support not simply lesser kingdoms than the kingdom of God, but opposing kingdoms which defy the basic assumptions of the kingdom of God." It is true that we often condone social, economic, and political structures that not only fall short of the kingdom of God but run contrary to it. And so we need to apply our three-fold question to every local, national, and international situation as we seek to formulate a strategy for responsible Christian social action. Who can deny that it is the will of God that we



should under all circumstances build up and conserve human, communal, and environmental values?

Dr. George F. MacLeod has pleaded with us not to confine religion to the churches but to take it out into government, the business world, and everywhere that people live. He says,

I simply argue that the Cross be raised again at the centre of the market-place as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage-heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek...; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died. And that is what He died about. And that is where churchmen should be and what churchmanship should be about.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly the Christian faith is not only for churches but for the world; it is not a private religion for individuals but rather Good News for societies too. And so, when we ask, Why do we engage in Christian social action? our answer is that we have no choice. Jesus Christ is not only the Savior of persons but of the world. And so we can never be satisfied as long as the social, economic, and political structures of our society or any other society fall short of the standards of the kingdom of God. That means we must be tireless activists, struggling and sacrificing with God's help to transform the communities of this world until they fully reflect the righteousness of God!

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<sup>1</sup>George F. MacLeod, Only One Way Left (Glasgow: Iona Community, 1958), p. 38.

## Chapter 9

### SO WHAT?

In this brief concluding chapter we ask, So what? We have given a theologically liberal outline of the Christian faith, and those who have persisted and read to the end may wonder, What of it?

There is plenty about which to be enthusiastic! Our discussion of the Bible has made clear that modern scholarship has made the Bible come alive for us as a relevant source of religious truth. It is the record of our spiritual heritage and reveals how God has spoken through the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, and has revealed Himself supremely in Jesus Christ. It is the book that verifies the centrality of faith, the necessity of love, and the importance of social justice. No sensitive person can read the Bible without being profoundly grateful that we have this greatest written source of spiritual truth.

We should be just as excited about what we have learned about God. We should not think of God as a supernatural miracle worker but rather as the Redeemer who unfailingly seeks to fulfill the highest possibilities in every situation. We may study the functioning of God in the "laws of nature" and in the creative and transforming experiences of life. God's nature is love, and He is personal in the sense that we may relate our lives to Him personally in faith and prayer. God

never falters in His saving activity, and His grace is extended to us always. With such Good News how can we fail to stand up and cheer?

But the tragic part of the story is our sin. We have acknowledged that our disobedience is the cause of our isolation, our brokenness, our alienation from God. We have misused our freedom to reject God's will and with tragic results. In our "lostness" we are called to repent and ask God's forgiveness.

We have seen that the great drama of our salvation centers in Jesus Christ. While God has spoken in various religious traditions and especially through the great personalities of the Bible, the supreme break-through was in Jesus Christ. He was the great teacher and messiah and the Savior of the world. In Him we behold superlatively God's saving love which alone can liberate us from our alienation and sin. Our human condition cries out for that saving love of God in Christ to reconcile us to God and free us to live the new life of faith. Nothing in this world is more important than for us to give our lives in sincere and whole-hearted commitment to God as we know Him in Christ. We must say Yes to God and allow God's love to do its saving work within us! Then we shall experience the boundless joy of the Christian life, a life that transcends even death.

Prayer, we have discovered, is to bring our lives in- to alignment with God's will, and it is often answered in ways

we had not foreseen. We do well to set out to live the answers to our prayers, thereby co-operating with God in the opening up of creative new life possibilities.

Both Christian missions and Christian social action set the shape of our Christian social strategy. Bubbling over with the joy of our faith, we cannot keep it to ourselves but must share it. And we cannot rest as long as people are hungry, illiterate, sick, and the victims of injustice. The kingdom of God is our goal; therefore with God's help we must consistently seek to transform our life styles and societies until they fully reflect the idealism and righteousness of God's realm.

How can any sensitive and informed person say, So what? to the Christian faith. It is for us the promise of Life. It is for the world the promise of victory. Let us resolve to live by faith!

**APPENDIX**

**EVALUATION BY LAY READERS**

## EVALUATION BY LAY READERS

My goal has been to write a brief layperson's guide to Christian theology. With the ready availability of so many conservative theological statements, there is a great need for a short, non-technical, theologically liberal exposition of the Christian faith for lay people. This book has been undertaken to supply that need. It was realized at the start that the success of this effort could not be judged solely by professional theologians. Therefore it was decided that ten lay readers should be chosen to evaluate the work chapter by chapter.

Ten lay persons who are members of the Claremont United Church of Christ, Congregational at Claremont, California agreed to participate. Two of them were in the age range of eighteen to thirty, five were from forty six to sixty years of age, and three were sixty one or over. Their formal education was as follows:

## Education of Lay Readers

Number of Readers	Education Completed
1	4 years of high school
1	1 year of college
3	4 years of college
2	5 years of college and university work
1	5½ years of college and university work
2	6 years of college and university work

At the beginning of the project these lay people were

asked to indicate whether the subjects listed below would be important or unimportant in the book and then to add other subjects that they thought would be important. The results of this poll are tabulated here:

#### Rating by Lay Readers of Subjects to Be Included

	Important	Unimportant
Bible	7	2
Church	6	2
Eternal life	8	2
Faith	10	0
God	8	0
Jesus Christ	9	0
Love	10	0
Missions	4	5
Prayer	10	0
Salvation	8	2
Sin	5	5
Social action	9	0
Suffering	8	1

Other subjects that the lay readers suggested were:

Goals  
 The race  
 Patience  
 Whole person concept  
 Guilt feelings  
 Humility and pride  
 The search  
 Twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous for non-alcoholics  
 Dying  
 Concept of the private citizen  
 Can a heathen who has never read a Bible or met a preacher live a Christian life?  
 Grace  
 Problem or evil

The rating of subjects by the lay readers and their additional suggestions were kept in mind in the choosing of chapter headings for the book as well as in the content of the narrative;

however I made the final decisions about the subject matter included. Knowing the people who made the suggestions made me conclude in some cases that they were suggesting a particular personal interest that would not be of general interest to a larger group of readers. Furthermore in the interest of making a balanced theological statement I included some themes such as "missions" and "sin" that rated low in the lay readers' ratings.

As the writing of the chapters progressed, they were sent to the lay readers for evaluation. They were asked to evaluate the extent to which they believed the various chapters achieved my purpose of providing a theologically liberal statement of the Christian faith for lay people. Their evaluations are tabulated here:

#### Evaluation of Chapters by Lay Readers

The chapters communicate a theologically liberal statement of the Christian faith to lay people:

Chapter 1 - Is the Bible True?			
Well	Passably	Poorly	
9	1		
Chapter 2 - What Is the Nature of God?			
Well	Passably	Poorly	
7	1	1	
Chapter 3 - Are We Sinners?			
Well	Passably	Poorly	
1	9		
Chapter 4 - What about Jesus as Teacher and Messiah?			
Well	Passably	Poorly	
1	8	1	



### Evaluation of Chapters by Lay Readers (continued)

The chapters communicate a theologically liberal statement of the Christian faith to lay people:

Chapter 5 - How Does Jesus Christ Save Us?	Well	Passably	Poorly
	6      2	1	1

Chapter 6 - Are Prayers Answered?	Well	Passably	Poorly
	10		

Chapter 7 - What Is the Role of Christian Missions in a Pluralistic World?	Well	Passably	Poorly
	8		2

Chapter 8 - Why Do We Engage in Christian Social Action?	Well	Passably	Poorly
	1      9		

Chapter 9 - So What?	Well	Passably	Poorly
	8      1		1

Additional written comments and suggestions were given by the lay readers for each chapter, and I am including the relevant ones here. Those comments that did not relate directly to the book are omitted, and I have changed words and punctuation here and there to clarify the meaning of the suggestions when they were not in grammatical form.

#### Chapter 1 - Is the Bible True?

I really like chapter 1, probably because that topic has often come up when talking to my nephew, and now I think I can answer him better!

I wish I had read this about the time I started Sunday school, or that my Sunday school teachers had communicated this liberal

view! I'd have been more comfortable with the Bible and perhaps have read it more. I like the concept of the Bible as a library. You state that "many of the so-called miracles are explainable on the basis of modern knowledge and natural phenomena." Why not give examples--earthquakes, psychosomatic healings, etc.? I wish you would quote more prominent lay people and fewer theologians. I think lay readers would be more interested in what Eisenhower, Truman, Edward R. Morrow, or Mark Twain might offer in the way of insight in what the Bible and God gave to their considerable lives and accomplishments.

You might mention that there have been very different translations of the same passage--early Councils deliberately omitting or altering passages to strengthen their viewpoints and thus their power--key passages where one word had several meanings, anyone of which could cause faulty translation.

In chapter 1 you have used a number of specific examples to prove your points, as well as documented foot notes, but the text itself might be more informative if a few more references could be included. For example, lay people are not always acquainted with recent Biblical research. Would it be possible to include a brief accounting of such on page 2 and an example of how "recent archeology has underlined historical reliability" on page 3?

## Chapter 2 - What Is the Nature of God?

Chapter 2 is good, but I haven't tried to argue that topic!

I like it very much and have underlined many sentences that have given me a new insight or the thought, "Why couldn't I think of that?"

(After making some suggestions about style.) Over all this text does a superb, excellent, fantastic, and marvellous job of communicating a great deal of what I perceive to be the liberal Protestant faith.

How unfortunate, in a way, that the "most important question" is the hardest for any of us to communicate. But maybe it is just as well that the majesty and the mystery of God cannot be verbalized to anyone's satisfaction. I like your "transcendent" and "immanent" concept, especially the immanent which we see in our mates, our family, our friends.

I truly found both chapters (chapters 1 and 2) very easy to read and understand.

Well done!

Chapter 2 is exciting. Your explanation of the Trinity is beautifully done.

I find these (chapters 1 and 2) both interesting and most educational. I feel you have covered your ground well.

### Chapter 3 - Are We Sinners?

I would welcome direct discussion of Paul's definition of sin as whatever is not of faith. This would, I think, include not only faith in God, but also faith in ourselves and abilities, in others, in the present and future, and in every individual's capacity to make good choices.

I thought chapter 3 was excellent. It was very helpful to me, clearly explaining the dimensions of sin. For so long I, like others perhaps, have deluded myself that I have been a good person to the extent that I have not been a bad person, that I have been generally "sinless" by not lying, cheating, coveting, or hurting others, and therefore God. But I am coming to understand that apathy to the needs of all mankind and the world might constitute the greatest sin of all.

(About chapters 3, 4, and 5.) I truly felt these chapters were well written, and I related very well to what you said. In fact, I appreciated much of what you said just for me.

The Adam and Eve story, the fall of man, seems out of a fundamentalist text: symbolism as opposed to "exact truth" needs to be strengthened.

I suggest more use of quotations without reference to the person quoted except in the footnotes. It sounds like name dropping otherwise. The brief mention of educational snobbery is good but should be amplified. Intellectuals generally are not among the noblest Christians.

I question the use of the Tower of Babel illustration, especially "therefore the entire project came to naught." It is true that several rulers attempted to complete the Tower and failed. However it was completed under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (605-561 B.C.).

I like your treatment that all human suffering is not the result of sin.

### Chapter 4 - What about Jesus as Teacher and Messiah?

We speak of Jesus' humanness and of his divinity in the same

breath and same sentence, that he was such a great human being and yet divine. I wonder if his strength, creativity, teaching ability, understanding, and goodness came entirely from the fact that he was "anointed by God with the Holy Spirit," or whether some of it came from good parents with good values, from hard work, from self-discipline and a conscious striving for self-improvement and good. I'd be interested in more discussion of this.

Excellent liberal thought in lack of necessity of belief in the virgin birth and in portrayal of Kingdom as both a state or "quality of life" and of "the life to come." Whole chapter excellent but would suggest the last paragraph is anticlimactic. The chapter speaks for itself.

Regarding your statement that the first of the Gospels to be written was Mark, Dr. Pierson Parker indicates that J. A. T. Robinson, Biblical scholar, dates the Gospel of John in the forties. Dr. Parker himself feels that a core of John was written in the forties and the balance written and added later.

Liked explanation of the kingdom of God.

## Chapter 5 - How Does Jesus Christ Save Us?

I very much like chapter 5. It makes very clear some of the areas that are interpreted quite differently by less liberal people.

Your writing is excellent--with one exception. You have, I feel, drifted from the subject and led your readers into the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps this would be better reading in two chapters. It is rather wordy and away from the topic of discussion.

The last two paragraphs of the chapter are exciting! The last paragraph, more than anything in the five chapters, communicates the boundless nature of God's far-reaching love.

(About the first five chapters.) I think in all of the chapters you've sent me that you've done an excellent job of communicating the stance of the liberal Protestant church. Thanks so much for doing so. At last I know what it means to be one! There is a logical consistency to all your writing, and you do a marvellous job of conveying the joy of God's love.

(About the first five chapters.) I'm not a theologian and perhaps my views are not what you want. I enjoyed it. I see a good work and yet want more from it. Perhaps it's coming. I

feel on a scale of 10 you're at  $8\frac{1}{2}$ , doing well. I couldn't do it at all. Perhaps I'm a bit more fundamental than I thought. But it's good!

Hurrah! for the refutation of "conservative" original sin, and of God as a legalistic, arbitrary deity. The resurrection--most stimulating and thought provoking! Salvation--as a "this world" and "next world" possibility through acceptance of God's love and grace--most stimulating.

I disagree with your interpretation of the Gospel of John. Consequently I am not able to judge whether or not you have achieved your purpose in chapter 5.

(Referring to an article by John Dart in the Los Angeles Times of November 19, 1977 entitled "Semantics Crux of Resurrection Debate.") Thus it appears that there were three possibilities --namely physical resurrection, bodily resurrection, and spiritual resurrection.

## Chapter 6 - Are Prayers Answered?

An excellent chapter. The last sentence is particularly relevant: "answered in God's way, not ours."

Prayers are answered if we work on them hard enough, and things do change, and situations happen by the will of God, not the strength of God, which means again, unless there's a miracle, we have to function.

Very complete and honest.

Excellent use of apropos illustrations and quotations.

## Chapter 7 - What Is the Role of Christian Missions in a Pluralistic World?

The chapter on missions is perhaps long, but I guess some would feel it needs to be said.

Every other paragraph is name dropping. Doesn't Dave Held have some ideas of his own on this subject? I'll read it again, but I think it is far from liberal, almost fundamentalist in apology for "Christian" missions' preoccupation with "the heathen." Sorry, but we're a million miles apart on this one!

This chapter communicates a fundamental statement, not liber-

al. Your discussion of world hunger is interesting, but I feel it makes the case for government aid in money and know-how abroad and the likes of the Peace Corps and the business sector in solving the problem. Not the church missions.

Very comprehensive.

#### Chapter 8 - Why Do We Engage in Christian Social Action?

I like your social action chapter.

Excellent, but it is hard to reconcile the author of this chapter as the same author of chapter 7. This chapter is marvelously liberal, and chapter 7 is dogmatically fundamentalist.

Excellent. Enjoyed this the best.

#### Chapter 9 - So What?

Anti-climactic, a great let down. It needs amplification and a much stronger finish. Here, perhaps, many of the quotes of prior chapters belong. It should be extended with a brief paragraph review for each of the preceding chapters and a final summation.

Very good. I do not like the wording of the "Let us resolve to live by faith." It seems trite after all the statements previous.

(About chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9.) All four chapters well done.

#### Comments on the Entire Book

I really liked all of your chapters. I wasn't just being nice in giving them good marks! I know several people who would be interested in seeing this if you get copies out sometime. We surely need more of this sort of thing available.

Overall an excellent liberal theological exposition.

Your work is very good.

I found it enlightening as you have handled your material well, getting your point across in laymen's language so anyone should understand the contents.

I have learned much in the reading.

Congratulations on the achievement of this book. We appreciate the opportunity you've given us to think more deeply about great truths.

The evaluations, comments, and suggestions of the ten lay readers speak for themselves; however I wish to make a few brief observations. In the rating of subjects to be included "missions" was the lowest. It is not surprising, therefore that the chapter on missions when evaluated had two lay readers suggest that it "poorly" communicates a theologically liberal statement of the Christian faith. On the other hand, in the original rating of subjects "sin" was also rated low, but chapter 3 on that theme received among the highest evaluations.

"Faith," "love," and "prayer" were unanimously judged important for inclusion in the book by the lay readers. But it is a little difficult to single out the lay readers' evaluation of my handling of "faith" and "love" because they are included in chapters 4 and 5 on Jesus as teacher, messiah, and Savior. I suspect that they were evaluating my discussion of Jesus in these roles rather than my comments on "faith" and "love." The chapter on prayer, on the other hand, was judged to be good with all ten indicating that it "well" communicates a liberal statement of the faith.

The question may be asked, Were these lay evaluations objective since they were done by members of the church I serve and therefore would be inclined to be reluctant to be too critical of their minister? Perhaps that was a problem,

and yet I continually urged them to be frank and forthright in their comments. As you can see from the foregoing report, most of them were. I believe it is fair to say that most of them thought that I had generally succeeded in achieving my goal of writing a short book that communicates a theologically liberal statement of the Christian faith to lay people.



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Note: All of the Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.